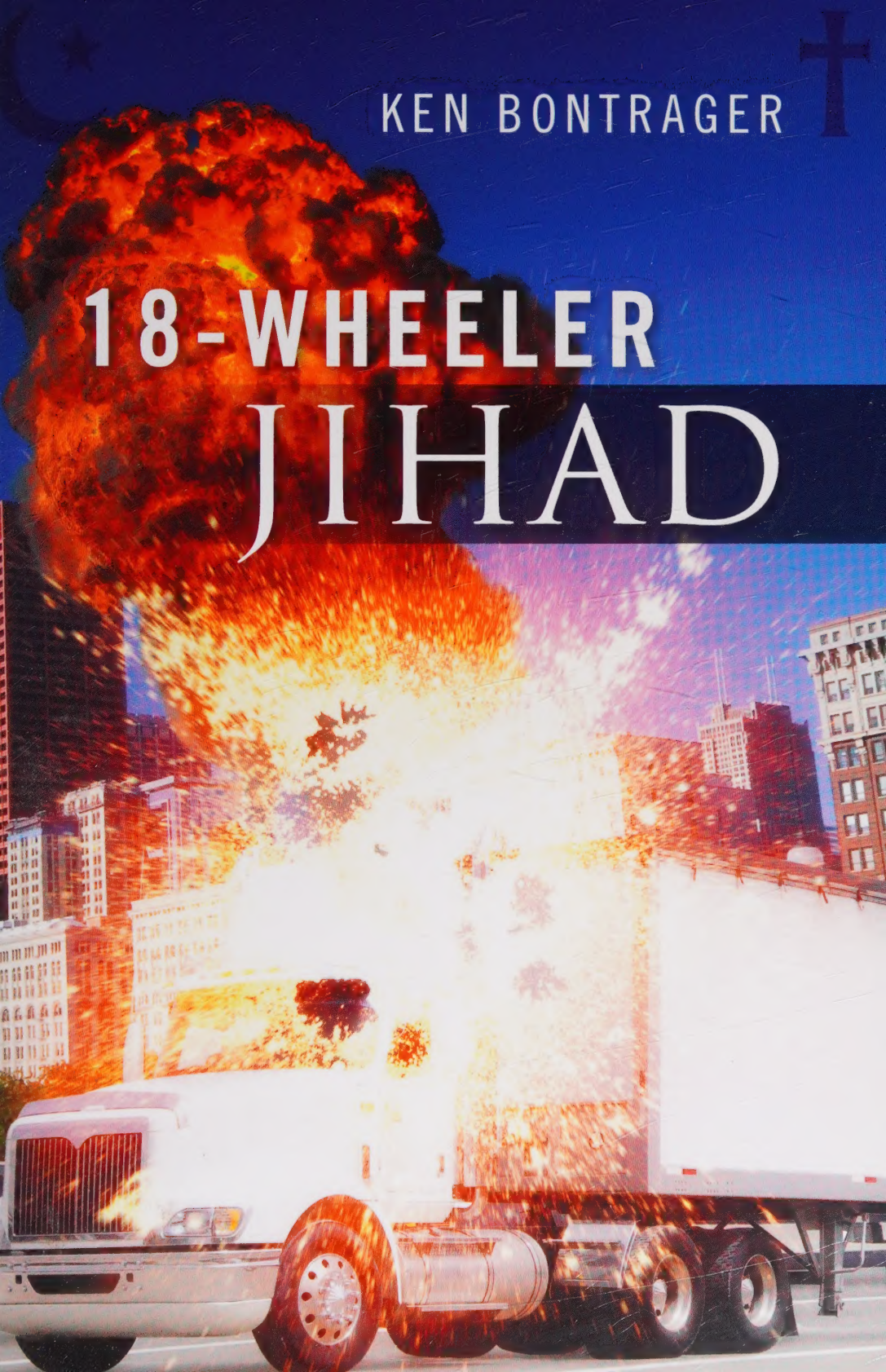
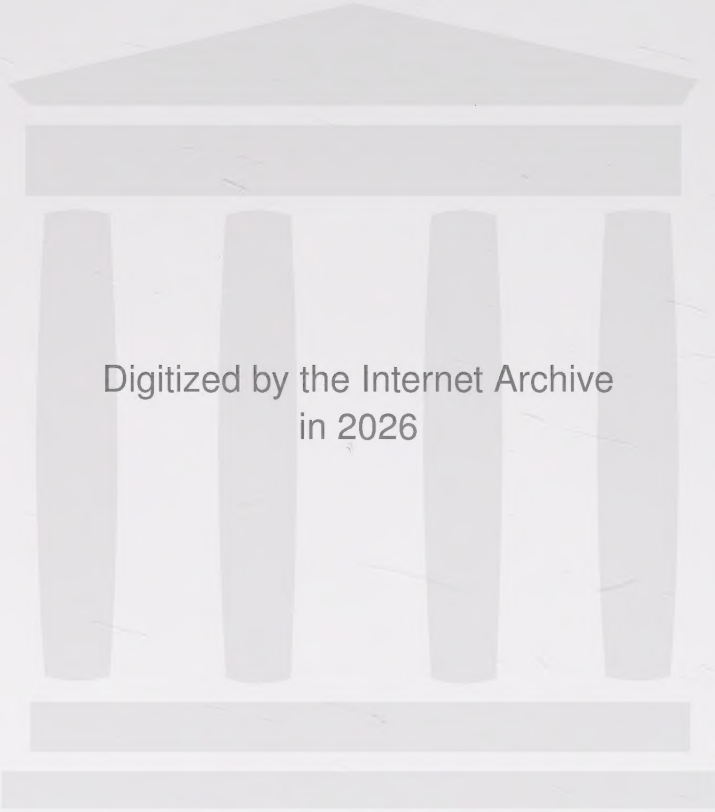




KEN BONTRAGER

18-WHEELER JIHAD



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Chapter 1

The bloodcurdling scream piercing the night jolted Will Scott out of a sound sleep. No matter how often he heard that scream he could never get used to it. He rolled over and pulled his wife Patricia to him. Clammy, sweaty skin, trembling body, the nightmare had returned again.

September 11, 2001, the day Patricia's world exploded. She would never forget. The demons in her nightmares wouldn't let her.

She was a rookie cop in New York City. That fateful day she and her partner Mack Harper from the first precinct of Lower Manhattan had been walking their beat just five blocks from the World Trade Center when the first jet crashed into Tower One.

Patricia and Mack had just grabbed some coffee from the Starbucks at the corner of Church Street and Murray. Mack got his usual regular coffee, black. That's how Mack was; regular guy, always the same, solid as a rock, a man you could count on. Patricia, on the other hand, was the more adventuresome type, always trying something new. That day it was peppermint mocha Frappuccino light. Now, 10 years later, she still wondered what one of those would taste like. She never ordered one again.

They had just walked out onto the sidewalk with their steaming cups in hand. Patricia remembers making some comment to Mack that he should really try to get out of his box and try something new once in a while.

The thunderous sound broke through the normal New York sounds of impatient taxi drivers leaning on their horns and buses revving their diesel engines as they pulled away from curbs with their loads of unsuspecting passengers.

Mack and Patricia dropped their drinks into the nearest trash can as they sprinted down Church Street. Throngs of people met them with looks of sheer terror on their faces.

They were almost to the first tower when Patricia saw her. A young mother sitting on the curb crying softly as she cradled a small child in her arms. Papers from the offices high above were floating down all around her, but she didn't seem to notice. She was rocking her child, soothing her.

Patricia knelt down beside her. "Lady, you need to get out of here now," she said.

"I think I sprained my ankle or maybe broke it. I can't carry my baby," the mother said.

"Here, let me help you." Patricia pried the child from her mother's arms and helped the young mother to her feet. "Put your arm around my shoulders. I will be your crutch and carry your baby. Mack, go on without me. I'll catch up with you when I get these two to safety."

That was the last time she saw Mack Harper. Someone said they saw him going up the stairs of Tower One just before it came crashing down.

That scene of the smoke and dust, death and destruction was imprinted into Patricia's mind so vividly that each time the nightmare recurred she felt like she was there again. Hence, the scream.

It was that experience that motivated Patricia Scott to do what she did every day: fight terrorism. Those horrified faces of that awful day would forever be etched into her mind, and she had made a vow to herself to do everything within her power to fight terrorism until she drew her last breath, but she had to leave New York. The Big Apple just held too many memories. Maybe it was a twinge of guilt, knowing she should have been in that tower, could have been in that tower. Was it fate? A stroke of luck? Or did God have a bigger plan for her life?

Why was she spared that day when so many of her colleagues weren't? Too many questions, not enough answers.

Then a position became available at the Department of Homeland Security Counterterrorism Division in Chicago. Patricia applied for the job and got it.

The Midwest took some getting used to; too quiet for a big-city girl. Then she met Will, the man of her dreams. Whoever said opposites attract wasn't kidding. He was about as extreme country as she was extreme city. Blue jeans, tee shirts, and pickup trucks were his style. But there was something about that man that just swept her off her feet. He was 5 feet 10, sandy blond hair, a former football player's build with a little extra pudg around the middle, blue eyes, and handsome.

But it wasn't his good looks that attracted Patricia to him. Lord knows with her stunning dark beauty she could have landed any handsome man she wanted. No, it was his depth of character, honesty, and good-natured sense of humor that attracted her.

After moving to Chicago, Patricia had spent some time searching for a church where she felt comfortable. It seemed like each church she would visit had something about it that made her uncomfortable. Some churches were stuck in time with a few stodgy old people. Others seemed to cater to young people with all their programs, gyms, and professional bands, but they didn't seem to have the depth that she desired.

She kept hearing good things about a church that was 30 minutes from her apartment, Plainfield Community Church. After one visit, she was hooked. She couldn't really put her finger on what made this church so special, but there was something about it that made her want to come back every Sunday. That was where she met Will Scott.

They had been married for 10 years now. Hard to believe it had been that long already. Life was good for the two of them. She had a good job that she loved. He had a successful trucking company that he had built himself. They enjoyed their nice home in the country that they had designed themselves. Life was good.

But those blasted nightmares kept coming back . . .



When the Imam asked him to drive the dilapidated minivan into the wilderness for Allah, Josh Abdul Jamal agreed immediately.

Josh had grown up in Vegas, the son of Yemen immigrants who worked hard as housekeepers in the Monte Carlo Hotel.

When Josh was 8 years old, his parents had been killed in a horrific car accident. Visions of that night still flashed through his mind. He had been in the backseat of the Honda Civic. They were coming home from a visit to the Grand Canyon.

All he remembered was his mother screaming, screeching tires, lights of a big truck crossing the center line bearing down on them, the crunch of bending metal and breaking glass, waking up in the hospital confused and alone. What would he do, where would he live, how would an 8 year old survive alone?

Fortunately, the Imam, Yassar Hasrali, took Josh in, gave him a home, sent him to school, and taught him about their religion. Life was barely tolerable for Josh. He never forgot his parents. The Imam and his family tried to help him forget, but it never really worked. Josh became a very quiet boy, always angry, no friends. Of course, it didn't help that Yassar fed his anger by telling him it was those evil "infidels" that took his parents away from him.

Now 17 years old, Josh was willing to do anything for the cause of Allah.

Driving northeast of Las Vegas on I-15, Josh relished the cool morning air whipping through the open windows. On the horizon in front of him rose the orange ball of the sun, driving away the chilliness of the desert. It would scorch the landscape by midday.

He pulled off at Exit 64 and headed north on State Road 93, careful not to exceed the speed limit and draw attention to himself. About an hour later, he found a narrow dirt road leading into what looked

like the middle of nowhere. He drove another 15 minutes and pulled up beside a pile of rocks.

Josh sat for a few minutes and thought about what he was about to do. Yassar had assured him that he would be remembered forever for his bravery and that this was the first step in Allah's great plan for the infidels of the United States. He started getting excited that in a few minutes he would see his parents and live in paradise forever.

Josh turned around and looked at the silver stainless steel box in the back of the van. It looked like a small square tank about 2 feet wide and 3 feet long, 18 inches tall. Cold, shiny stainless steel. The tank was totally sealed with welded seams on each end.

He understood the implications of what he was about to do, that this was a test of something much bigger to come.

Josh reached down and picked up the cell phone that Yassar had given him. There was one number in the contacts list. He selected it and pushed SEND. A voice on the other end answered, and Josh read the code from his paper in his hand: "Operation 18 Go."



In a small house on the northwest side of Tehran, Abdas Hemati jumped with a start when he heard his satellite phone ring. Although he had been expecting the call to come any time, the sound of the phone still startled him when it finally came in.

In that split second before he answered the phone his mind raced with excitement as he thought about all the events leading up to this time. His parents had named him Abdas, which means servant of God. All his life they had taught him that Allah would someday use him in a mighty way to bring down Allah's enemies, the Great Satan America and the Little Satan Israel.

His parents had given him the best education possible. Early on, he had shown that he was very bright, so he had been allowed to attend the best schools in Tehran, and then his parents insisted that he go on

to London for college. Abdas hated his time in London. He never really learned to fit in with the crowd there so he spent most of his time studying alone. He had graduated at the top of his class in physics and chemistry.

That was 10 years ago. It didn't seem that long. When he returned from college, he was immediately offered a very good job within the government. Abdas felt privileged to be part of the inner circle of the government that was focused on restoring the caliphate for Allah.

How they longed for the glory days when the Ottoman Empire ruled the Middle East. The Ottoman Empire had been the largest and longest-running empire in history. Its territory encompassed most of southern Europe, Northeast Asia, and Northern Africa, plus all the Middle Eastern states. After World War I, the Ottoman Empire was dismantled. Abdas and people like him believed Allah had commanded them to reinstate the Ottoman Empire, but this time it would be a global empire. To make that happen, they understood that they would have to destroy the forces that were holding them back—America and Israel. To go against America head to head in a military conflict was out of the question. America was just too powerful, so they had to devise unconventional methods. Terrorism seemed to work. Since the Twin Towers were destroyed on 9/11, America had been forced to spend trillions of dollars, nearly bankrupting the nation. What Abdas and his friends had in mind now, he hoped, would be the final blow that would make America ineffective in world affairs. Only then could they proceed at will in conquering the rest of the world for Allah.

Abdas and his team of scientists had worked hard for 10 years to come up with a brilliant plan to destabilize America and bring chaos to the whole world in the hopes of speeding up the return of the Mahdi. The Mahdi, or 12th Imam, they believed was the 12th generation ruler after Mohammed. He had disappeared into a well when he was 6 years old. They believe that in the last days when the world was in chaos that the Mahdi would return to rule the new worldwide caliphate. They

also believed that it was their duty to create that chaos to speed the return of the Mahdi.

As Abdas stared at the phone ringing in his hand, his excitement grew to the point that he almost forgot to answer it, but slowly, he flipped it open and put the phone to his ear.

“Salam,” he said.

On the other end of the line he heard, “Operation 18 Go.”

Abdas closed the phone, thought for a second, opened the phone again, and with fingers trembling with excitement, dialed a number that was only known to him, pressed SEND, and listened. One ring . . . and then silence.



From atop a hill in the desert north of Las Vegas, Yassar Hasrali took the binoculars from his eyes and crawled down the hill to his car. He got in, turned the key in the ignition, then pulled out his cell phone and punched in a text. “OPERATION 18 SUCCESSFUL.”

Yassar put the black Mercedes in gear and headed back to Las Vegas.

He had seen the flash in the distance and knew the test had been successful. There had been some concern that the stainless steel case would somehow prevent the satellite signal from penetrating to the sophisticated detonator. Yassar was elated to see that it had worked flawlessly, even from thousands of miles away.

Yassar hoped his careful planning had been good enough, that he was the only one who saw or heard the explosion.

The success of the mission Allah had called him to depended on absolute secrecy. Yassar knew if the Americans had any suspicion of what they were planning, they could make things very difficult for them.

Yassar smiled as he thought about how gullible the Americans were. Just last year they had awarded him the top community service

award in Las Vegas for taking in so many underprivileged inner-city kids. If they only knew what was coming.

As the big Mercedes approached a bridge, Yassar checked his rear-view mirror to make sure no one was around. He hit the button to roll down the driver-side window, took the phone, broke it in half, and threw it as far as he could into the river below.

As he turned onto the southbound I-15 ramp he broke out into wicked laughter at the thought of what was about to happen to America.

Chapter 2

Patricia Scott stared at her computer screen. Three phone calls from the desert of Nevada to a phone in Iran that the Department of Homeland Security had been monitoring. Two incoming and one outgoing. What could that possibly mean?

She picked up the phone and called her colleague Mike Pence, who she fondly referred to as “the geek.” That term described him well. He was 25 years old, nerdy, wore black glasses, and his curly mop of brown hair always looked like it had never been introduced to a comb. Then there was his choice of clothes. Patricia called him “wardrobe challenged.” Today, he was wearing a plaid vest from the ’70s and brown corduroy pants that were 3 inches too short showing off white socks and penny loafers. His hands were always fidgeting with something when they weren’t flying across his computer keyboard. Either he was twirling a pencil in the air like a drummer twirls a drumstick or his fingers were fiddling with his hair, turning the tight curls into even tighter curls.

But Mike was perfect for the job he had. Computer hacking was his specialty. There was no one better at finding information. Mike and Patricia made a great team, and they both knew it.

“Hello,” Mike said.

“Have you seen these hits we are getting from Iran?”

“Well, yes, but that’s really not that unusual. Probably just some guy calling his cousin or something,” Mike said as he yawned loudly.

“I’m not so sure. Judging by the shortness of the calls they weren’t really catching up on the nieces and nephews, if you know what I mean. Can we get a recording of those calls?”

“Just a minute,” Mike said as he maneuvered his mouse on his

computer screen.

Patricia thought about how much easier it was now to get the information they needed since George Bush got the Patriot Act passed. Before that, they would have had to get a court order to trace a call, but now, they could trace suspicious international calls with impunity.

Mike came back on the line. "Looks like two of the calls were too short to get anything. The third call was actually a text message."

"Can you capture the text message?" Patricia asked impatiently.

"Yes, it said, 'Operation 18 successful.'"

"Any idea what that means?"

"I have no idea," Mike said. "Remember, I'm just the computer geek. It's your job to figure out what it means."

Patricia smiled. "OK, thanks for your help. Let me know if anything else comes up with operation 18 in it."

"Yes, ma'am."

Patricia hung up the phone and turned to her computer and typed operation 18 into the Google search bar. After 20 minutes of browsing, all she had to show for her frustration was some 18th funniest sick joke and some events that happened on the 18th day of a certain month, but nothing of any significance.

Since Patricia had started working for the Department of Homeland Security 10 years ago, she had learned that it seemed like about 90 percent of her time was wasted following up on useless information. But it seemed that over time, she had developed a gut instinct that set off alarm bells in her head when something just didn't seem right. This was one of those times. She wasn't sure why, but something was going on here. She knew it.

Next, she checked all the news wires to see if there was any unusual news out of Nevada, anything that would give a hint of terrorist activities.

Nothing.

Well, it was time to report to the boss before she went home

for the day. Justin Powell was a very meticulous man who was always pushing his team to do better, think outside the box more, and at the end of the day, he wanted all their work boiled down into a few sentences and put on his desk so that he could put the pieces together.

It was exactly that method that helped them stop the planned bombing of the state capitol building in Springfield, Illinois. When different parts of his team came up with different fragments—one had a phone conversation, another had someone caught on tape trying to buy some nitrogen fertilizer, another one discovered someone with a fake ID—Justin was able to take the pieces of the puzzle and put them together to create a trap for the bomber.

So Patricia wrote:

“Three calls today between the phone of Abdas Hemati in Tehran and someone in Nevada. One was a text message ‘operation 18 successful.’ Don’t know what it means, but I have a feeling something is going on. I checked all the news wires. Nothing unusual out of Nevada.”

Patricia walked down the hall to Justin’s office, noticed he was not in, laid her report on his desk, and headed down the stairs, glad to be going home for the day.

The homeland security building was in Naperville, a western suburb of Chicago. The building was an old brick and steel structure with no signs or anything that would let anyone know what really went on there. It looked like just another building in an industrial park. The huge satellite receivers on the roof had been camouflaged by a fake 8 foot wall around the perimeter of the roof making the building appear taller than it actually was.

What went on in that building was top secret. They had access to information from all the top intelligence agencies from around the world. It was their job to connect the dots, to see what others had missed. To put the pieces of the puzzle together.

Patricia got behind the wheel of her Toyota and pulled out of the

parking lot, glad to be headed home away from the stress and the noise of the big city to her little hometown of Plainfield and her country house and her husband of 10 years.

She thought about what an odd pair they were. She, the big-city, fast-paced, hi-tech type. Will, the country boy who grew up on a farm and now had built a large, successful trucking company.

But there was still something about that country boy that made her push that gas pedal down and head down Route 59 as fast as she dared.

Chapter 3

Will Scott glanced at the clock and decided it was time to go home. He checked in with Dirk Pierson, his top dispatcher, on the way out.

"Everything going alright?" Will asked as he leaned against the door frame leading to Dirk's office.

"Sure, everything is normal. The drivers all think the dispatchers are stupid, and the customers are screaming at the drivers for being late. Hey, just another day in paradise."

"Well, it keeps life from getting boring, right?"

"Oh yeah, but some days a little less drama would sure be nice."

"Well, hang in there, and I'll see you in the morning," Will said as he went to the door. "I've got a hot date with one beautiful chick tonight."

Dirk chuckled to himself as he watched Will head out to his pickup truck. It wasn't often you saw two people who had been married as long as Will and Patricia still being so madly in love. There was something about those two that Dirk just couldn't understand. They were always so happy and positive about life.

Will and Patricia made a striking couple, he being the tall, sandy-haired country boy who was most comfortable in a flannel shirt and blue jeans, and Patricia was a gorgeous 5 foot 5 woman with shoulder-length black hair and brown eyes. She had always taken the time to stay physically fit and could often be seen running through the countryside early in the morning, her hair pulled back in a pigtail that bobbed behind her head as she ran.

Dirk's life had been anything but happy and positive. He grew up in Plainfield. He and Will had gone to school together, but that's

where the similarities ended. Dirk's father had been an alcoholic that beat him every chance he got. His mother had turned to drugs to try to cope with the pain and had accidentally overdosed when he was 15 years old.

Dirk left home when he was 18. He hit the streets of Chicago searching for "the good life." What he found was a miserable life of drugs and alcohol abuse that eventually landed him in prison serving a 5-year sentence for robbing a convenience store.

When Dirk was released from prison, he made his way back to his hometown of Plainfield with a desire to start over, get a real job, settle down, and make something of himself.

Dirk's uncle Harry had been gracious enough to let him move in with him until he was able to find a job and afford a place of his own.

Dirk thought back to the morning that he and Uncle Harry were sitting in Sharon's Restaurant on the square when Will Scott walked in. Sharon's was the place where the locals hung out to catch up on all the latest news. The place was old, but its character matched the people who went there, with its creaky wooden floors, old booths along the sides of the long, narrow dining room, and a huge table in the middle they fondly called the liars' table. Groups of men would congregate at this table every morning to sip endless cups of coffee and swap stories about anything imaginable. Some were true, some were questionable, but all of them promised to be entertaining.

Dirk hadn't seen Will since high school, but it seemed like he hadn't changed a bit, maybe added a few pounds around the middle but still had the build of a football player, 5 foot 11 and about 200 pounds of rock-hard muscle.

Will recognized Dirk and Harry sitting in a booth and passed his usual spot at the big table as he came strolling over and asked if they minded if he joined them.

"Not at all," Dirk said as he shook his hand. "Long time, no see."

"Yeah, where ya been?" Scott asked.

"Oh, you know, around."

"What are you doing now?"

"Well, as a matter of fact, I'm looking for a job. Just got laid off in the city, so thought I'd come back home and see what's cookin' here."

"I just might have something for you," Scott said "My business is expanding, and I could use some good help. Can you drive a truck?"

"I never have, but I'm sure I could learn."

"That's the attitude I like. Come to work Monday at 7:00 and we'll team you up with one of our old pros and have you trained in no time."

Dirk exclaimed, "Thank you so much," as he shook Will's hand.

And that was how Dirk got hired at Scott Trucking Inc. After spending a few years on the road learning the ropes, he was promoted to dispatcher, and now was the head dispatcher overseeing a 3-man team and the schedules of 150 trucks that served all 48 states, Canada, and Mexico.

Being a dispatcher was very stressful, but Dirk thrived on the stress. There was always a new challenge every day. From a truck broken down in New York to a snowstorm in Detroit to a traffic jam in San Francisco. Every day brought its own set of circumstances that called on Dirk's quick thinking and ingenuity to get the job done.

Dirk looked at the clock as he was wrapping up. It was 8 P.M. again, time to go home and try to put the stress of the day behind him. He was glad it wasn't his turn to be on call for night dispatch. The four dispatchers took turns being on call, and tonight was his night off, which meant he could leave his computer at the office and head home.

Dirk went out and crawled behind the wheel of his Lincoln Town Car. He always liked big cars for some reason. Made him feel like he was in control of something big.

As he drove the familiar country road heading into town the hair on the back of his neck started to tingle as he got the feeling he wasn't alone. Suddenly, a hand reached up, and he felt cold steel pressed against his neck.

Chapter 4

“Take it easy now” the voice behind him said, “and nobody needs to get hurt.”

“Who the heck are you?” Dirk said quietly as he tried to maintain control of the car.

“You’ll remember me soon enough. I just need a little favor from you.”

Dirk racked his brain as he tried to place the voice. It sounded familiar, but he just couldn’t think where he had heard it before.

“Drive to this address,” the voice said as he handed Dirk a slip of paper.

“Why should I? You need to tell me what’s going on here.”

“Well, you are not in much of a position to be making demands here, now, are you? Drive to that address and you will find out what’s going on.”

“And if I don’t?”

“Then not only will I put this bullet through your head, but your uncle and his family will be tortured and killed as well.”

Dirk was startled. How did this guy know how close he had gotten to his uncle and his family? And that voice with the heavy accent. Where had he heard that voice before?

Dirk looked at the address in his hand again. That was a section of town with some abandoned warehouses. Was this lunatic planning to take him there to kill him or what?

As if reading his mind, the voice from the backseat said, “No, Dirk, I am not going to kill you. That is, if you cooperate. Now if you choose not to cooperate, well, I can’t be held responsible for that. We just need your assistance in a little project that we are undertaking, and I

believe you agreed once that when we need you we could call on you.”

Suddenly Dirk remembered where he had heard that voice. In prison.

Life is hard in prison, and if a person is going to survive, he needs some friends. Dirk's cell mate was a small Middle-Eastern guy named Hemdi Abdul. Hemdi was a wiry little guy, just 5 foot 3, and Dirk guessed about 130 pounds, but what he lacked in size he made up for with the fierceness of his face.

With piercing eyes, black as coal that seemed to look right through you to the core of your soul, and the ugly scar on the left side of his face that looked like his cheek had gone through a meat grinder, Hemdi was an imposing figure.

When Dirk was shoved into his cell, Hemdi was sitting cross-legged on the bottom bunk and stared at Dirk with those unblinking black eyes that seemed to size him up and expose every secret he ever had, right down to the core of his being.

Dirk stretched out his hand. “Hi, my name is Dirk,” he offered.

The black eyes just stared back, and the face remained totally expressionless.

“Well, I can see you're a friendly sort of fella.” Dirk leaned down and put his face in front of Hemdi's and whispered, “What's wrong? No talky?”

Quicker than greased lightning, before Dirk could respond, he found himself in a headlock with an arm that was surprisingly strong. Hemdi's other hand held a makeshift knife to his throat, and then with a heavily accented voice, he said, “Let's get one thing straight right now. This is my cell, and you are my guest. The only reason you are alive is because I have allowed you to be alive.”

“OK, OK, chill out, man. I was just trying to be friendly.”

“I don't need you for friend.”

“OK, no problem. Can I have my head back now?”

“You only get it back because I allow you to have it back, but don't

forget, I can take it from you at any time.” Hemdi released his grip on Dirk’s neck and removed the makeshift knife from his throat.

“OK, I got it. Wow, what a welcome. Is this how you greet every stranger you meet?”

Hemdi gave a half smile, the first emotion Dirk had seen from this guy who seemed tough as iron. “No, some are worse. I just happen to like you.”

Over the next few months, Hemdi and Dirk actually started to develop a liking for each other.

Dirk noticed that every day at the same time Hemdi would pull a little carpet out from under his mattress and face toward the east and bow down and chant some kind of prayer. One day, Dirk finally got the nerve to ask, “Hemdi, what exactly are you doing with that carpet?”

“I am praying to Allah.”

“Does it help?”

“Oh, yes.”

“Can you teach me more about this Allah?”

“Oh, yes, on Friday we go to the gymnasium and hear teaching from the Holy Book. You can come with me.”

So every Friday, Dirk started going with Hemdi to the gymnasium where there were usually around 30 men who gathered, and one of them would read from the Koran, and they would say prayers.

Dirk had never been a part of a group of men before where he had experienced so much . . . He wasn’t sure how to explain it. It wasn’t really love. It was more of a respect for each other. An acceptance that he had never felt before in his life. A sense of a brotherhood where they were looking out for each other and that was something totally new that Dirk had never experienced before. He was amazed at the diversity of the group. Although there were several like Hemdi from Middle-Eastern descent, the majority were Americans, both white and black.

One day, Dirk asked the leader of the group what it takes to be-

come a Muslim. "It's really quite simple," he said. "All you have to do is believe and recite this phrase, 'I bear witness that there is no deity worthy to be worshiped but Allah, and I bear witness that Muhammad is His servant and messenger.'"

"That sounds easy enough. I'll do it."

So Dirk became a Muslim.

It was at those Friday meetings that Dirk learned to know the man behind the voice, Sam Banscott.

Sam seemed to be the self-appointed leader of the group, a tall, dark-haired Italian. Sam didn't really look like the typical Muslim. After spending most of his adult life in prison for Chicago mob-related crimes, he had become very hardened and embittered toward the American system.

Islam gave Sam a purpose and an avenue to vent his hatred.

Dirk remembered Sam talking many times that one day they would find a way to take down the American government in the name of Allah so that Islam could rule the world and usher in a time of global peace like the world had never seen before. Sam had asked each person in the group to pledge their ability to help when the time was right, and Dirk had gladly agreed. Now, Dirk realized the man in his car was Sam Banscott.

They were pulling up to the address Sam had given Dirk. "Pull around behind this warehouse," Sam directed.

As Dirk drove around the corner of the building he noticed one other car parked there, a grey Toyota with New York plates.

"Park beside that car and get out."

"OK, you can put that gun away now, Sam."

"I'll put it away, just don't try anything stupid."

They walked into the warehouse, and Sam led the way to a corner office where he could see the silhouette of a man that Dirk didn't recognize sitting behind an old abandoned metal desk. As they got closer, Dirk noticed there was a bright light positioned behind the man in

such a way that all they could see was his outline, but his face was in the shadows.

"That's far enough," the man said. "I am pleased to meet you, Dirk. I have heard a lot of good things about you."

"Who are you?"

"For your own safety I think it will be better if you don't know who I am."

"OK, so why am I here? What do you want from me?" Dirk said impatiently.

"Relax. We have a business proposition to make to you."

"OK, I'm listening."

"Remember when you were in prison with Sam here that you made a pledge that when the time came for Allah to set up his world-wide kingdom of peace that you would be willing to help in any way you could?"

"Yes, I remember."

"It's time."

"Time for what?"

"Allah has placed you in a very important position. You don't know this, but Scott Trucking recently hired six drivers that are working with us."

"Why wasn't I informed of this before now?"

"Dirk, please understand something. Everyone is on a need to know basis, and up until now, you didn't need to know. Sam will give you a list of the drivers and when the time is right, we need all six of those drivers at a certain warehouse in Texas to pick up loads of coffee from Nicaragua. Do you think you can make that happen?"

"Yes, I'm sure I can make that happen. What else besides coffee will they be hauling?"

"That gets us back to the need to know thing, and right now, you don't need to know."

"Understood. So where will the coffee be delivered to?"

“We will let you know when the time arrives; you will be getting shipping orders from different companies around the country.”

“So, when is this going to happen?”

“Man, you are full of questions. Soon, we’ll be in touch. We are just waiting for a few more pieces of the puzzle to fall into place and we’ll be ready.”

“OK.”

“Dirk, I don’t think I have to warn you about the importance of secrecy. There is a lot riding on this operation, and if you screw it up, there are some very powerful people that are going to be very unhappy, if you know what I mean.”

“I understand.”

“OK, you may go now, and we will be in contact soon.”

Dirk walked back to his car, leaving Sam there with the mystery man. He was trying to sort out his emotions as he got in and headed on home. A mixture of excitement, fear, dread — he wasn’t quite sure. One part of him was excited that Allah had chosen him for such a task, but another part of him was filled with apprehension about what he had just agreed to, although he wasn’t really sure what that was.

Chapter 5

Abdas Hemati could feel his heart pounding with excitement as the Iranian government jet he was riding in touched down at Sunan International Airport 24 kilometers north of Pyongyang, North Korea. This was the moment he had been living for. Abdas didn't have much love for the North Koreans, and he was sure they didn't have much use for him either, but the one thing that united them was their mutual hatred for America.

Abdas had come up with the plan to partner with the North Koreans to develop a new type of weapon. He and his team had spent many months in North Korea designing and developing this special weapon, and now he was returning to oversee the weapon's deployment. In return, the Iranian government was giving North Korea billions of dollars' worth of aid.

Abdas smiled wryly as he thought about how easy it was to bypass the United Nations and all their ridiculous sanctions to try to stop Iran from developing nuclear weapons.

What the UN inspectors saw on their inspection trips to Iran was exactly what Iran wanted them to see. Peaceful nuclear plants pumping out electricity. But the real nuclear program was hidden deep inside the mountains of Iran and now in faraway places like North Korea.

As the jet pulled to a stop, a fuel truck pulled up and immediately the crew started refueling the plane. Simultaneously, three army trucks pulled up. Two of the trucks pulled up alongside the plane. The other truck stopped a short distance away and a dozen armed guards jumped out and formed a circle around the plane.

Six crates were quickly unloaded from the first two trucks and strapped into the cargo hold of the plane. In less than 10 minutes they

were airborne again. Avoiding Japanese air space, they headed south over the Yellow Sea, and then west across China and Africa to a destination halfway around the world to another government that had become a mutual ally of Iran, Venezuela.

Abdas turned to his three associates and said, "This is a great day for Allah. We are about to make history. Soon, the whole world will know that there is no god but Allah and Muhammad is his prophet.

"Now let's get some sleep. Tomorrow we will have a lot of work to do."

Chapter 6

Patricia Scott jumped with a start as the phone on her desk rang. She had been in deep thought as she pored over the intelligence reports that had come in overnight. Most of them were meaningless, but occasionally, there was something that would help connect the dots on a terrorist plot somewhere in the world.

She pushed the speaker button on her phone. "Hello."

"I need you in my office immediately," Justin Powell's voice growled over the phone. Twenty years of smoking had given his voice a deep, raspy sound that made it sound like he was angry even when he wasn't.

"Be right there."

Patricia grabbed a pad of paper and a pen and headed down the hall to Justin's office. She noticed that Mike Pence was already there.

"Have a seat, Patty," Justin said without looking up from what he was staring at in front of him.

Patricia hated when he called her "Patty." He knew it, but he did it anyway. When she was a child, people used to call her "Pattycakes," and she grew up to hate that name.

"What's up?"

Mike handed her a picture of what looked like a satellite image. "This picture was taken yesterday afternoon. You will notice there is a dark spot in the center of some scattered debris."

"Looks like some kind of an explosion happened," said Patricia as she studied the picture.

Mike, who had been unusually quiet up to this point, chimed in. "Explosion? Yes. But not kids playing with some firecrackers. I was able to zoom in and got this." He handed Patricia another photo. Patricia gasped as she saw what appeared to be a human arm lying next to a

piece of twisted iron that looked like the frame of a vehicle.

“OK, so someone detonated a car bomb out in the middle of nowhere and killed someone. My guess is this guy somehow set this thing off accidentally before he got to where he was supposed to go. Good for him. He probably saved a lot of lives. So where is this? Somewhere in Iraq?”

Mike looked over at her and for once in his life had a serious look on his face and said in barely a whisper, “Nevada.”

“What? Oh my God! Operation 18 yesterday. The phone calls were to Nevada, right? From Iran. Abdas Hemati. Do you think there’s a connection? There *has* to be a connection. Mike, can you tell us what time this happened?”

“Not exactly. The satellite passes over Nevada about 3 P.M. every day. It was there yesterday, so I went back to the same coordinates the day before and there was nothing but rocks and sagebrush.”

“So the time frame is right to coincide with the phone calls. There is only one reason for Abdas to do something like this. He was obviously testing something. Do we know where Abdas is now?”

Justin said, “We have our operatives in Iran looking for him. So far nothing.” He handed Patricia an envelope. “Here is a ticket to Las Vegas. I’ll have a chopper meet you at the airport and some bomb experts from the FBI will meet you there as well. We need to get to the bottom of this fast. Whatever this means it can’t be good.”

“You are sending me to Vegas? Oh, I’ll bet millions of people would just love to have my job,” she said sarcastically. “Going to Vegas on a ‘business trip.’”

Mike laughed. “Too bad the only partying you’ll be doing is with a dead person.”

Patricia made a face at him and stood to leave.

Justin said, “Better hurry, Patty. Your plane leaves in an hour.”

“Hey, thanks a lot for giving me time to pack. I’ll barely have time to get to the airport.”

Patricia ran down the hall to her office, grabbed her purse and a

bag that was always packed and ready for just such an occasion, and headed for the door. She checked out through security and hit the parking lot at a dead run.

Once in the car and headed down the road, she grabbed her cell phone and called her husband.

"Hello, gorgeous," Will said when he answered the phone.

"Hi, baby, I was so looking forward to meeting you for lunch today, but something came up and I have to catch a plane to somewhere, so can we have a rain check?"

"Aw, shucks. It's not that often I'm in your neighborhood visiting customers, but I understand. Where are you going?"

"Will, you know I can't tell you that. Classified information, you know."

"When will you be back?"

"I don't know, let me check my ticket." Patricia pulled the envelope from her purse and pulled out the e-ticket to check her flight schedule. "Oh, great, it's a one-way ticket, so I don't know when I'll be back. I'll call you."

"We have that meeting at church tonight, you know."

"I'm going to miss that. Just tell everyone to pray for our country. There is something big going on. Not sure what yet, but it's not good."

"Well, I'm glad we've got you looking out for us."

"Thanks, Will, I love you."

"Love you too, baby, have a good and safe trip."

Patricia put the phone back in her purse, checked the time on the dash of her car, and stepped on it. "I don't know why Justin always cuts my time so close," she muttered as she weaved in and out of traffic.

Twenty-five minutes later, she pulled into the O'Hare parking lot. Fortunately, she had a permit to park in the reserved section. She was thankful the job had a few perks.

Justin had printed out her boarding pass, so she headed straight for security, saw the long line, and was thankful again for another perk as she showed her HSA badge to the TSA agent and was expedited

through the line.

She looked at her gate number again, C38, and checked the monitor as she walked by. It said on time which was in 5 minutes. She kicked it up to a sprint because C38 was all the way at the end of that ridiculously long hallway.

The last passengers were just boarding, and the attendant was reaching for the door when Patricia came running up to the gate.

"Miss, you just about missed your flight," the flight attendant said as she looked at her ticket. "Wait, you just booked this flight this morning. We have to do another security check on you. You might still miss your flight. Step over here to this table."

Patricia knew what was going on. After 9/11, new security measures were put in place that flagged last-minute travelers as possible terrorists. She reached in her purse and got out her HSA badge and flashed it in front of the TSA agent. "I am not a terrorist, thank you. I am on the other side of the fence, if you know what I mean."

The big black woman was less than impressed. "How do I know that thing's not fake? Now step over here so we can check you out."

The flight attendant took her time rummaging through Patricia's bag and her purse until finally she was satisfied. "OK, go on, get on the plane, and next time, don't be so late."

Patricia found her seat, pulled out her phone, and sent a quick text to Justin. "ON THE PLANE. NEXT TIME, HOW ABOUT MORE TIME? WHAT ARE YOU TRYING TO DO, KILL ME?"

A few seconds later she got a text back. "No, JUST DOING MY PART TO KEEP YOU IN SHAPE. THANK ME."

Back in the terminal, the TSA agent at the door sent a text message on her cell phone. "HSA AGENT PATRICIA SCOTT IS ON FLIGHT 4713 TO LAS VEGAS." She wasn't sure who she was sending the information to or why. All she knew was that the extra \$100 per text she was being paid for that type of information sure came in handy.

Chapter 7

The big Iranian jet lowered its landing gear as it made the descent from 41,000 feet into Venezuelan airspace. They were headed for a little isolated airport in the northern part of Venezuela that was used by the drug cartels.

Abdas hoped the information they had been given was correct, that the runway could handle this big plane with its very expensive cargo. He looked out the window and could see that the runway ran parallel to a river, and he could see that it emptied out into the Caribbean Sea just a few miles downstream.

The pilot expertly landed the plane, even though the runway was nothing but hard-packed dirt. He taxied off to the side of the runway and turned the plane so that the wing tip was just a few feet from the edge of the jungle.

There were five men waiting in the shadows of the trees. One of the men on the plane opened the door and let the steps down. The Iranians each grabbed an automatic rifle as they stepped off the plane. One of the men from the jungle stepped forward and came up to meet Abdas. They embraced in traditional Middle Eastern style and spoke to each other in Farsi.

“Raifa, my brother, it is so good to see you again,” said Abdas.

“It is good to see you as well. Everything is prepared. We must not waste any time. You never know when one of those American spy drones will be flying overhead.”

“OK, let’s do it.” He turned to one of the Iranians. “Open the luggage compartment.”

The Iranian opened the compartment as Raifa motioned the men standing in the forest forward.

The Venezuelans were big husky fellas who looked like they were used to hard work. They grabbed one of the crates and headed for the forest. Abdas and Raifa followed closely behind. It was only about 30 yards down a well-worn path to the river where there was a little makeshift dock, and moored to the dock was a vehicle like Abdas had never seen before. All he could see was an open hatch sticking out of the water. The workers quickly lowered the crate into the hatch to some men waiting below, and then turned to get the next one.

The submarine belonged to a drug cartel and had been used for several years to smuggle drugs north to America. Although no one could prove it, most people believed the drug cartel was backed by the Venezuelan government.

Drug cartels were all about making money, and they really didn't care how they made it. If you offered them enough money, they would do just about anything. The \$10 million that Abdas had already transferred to their account, and the promise of another \$10 million when the freight was delivered, would be sufficient.

Raifa motioned Abdas to follow him over to the side of the path to where there were some of those cheap plastic chairs that seemed to be everywhere in Latin America.

Raifa was Abdas's younger brother. At 35, he was a handsome man in his prime. He was dressed in khaki shorts and a T-shirt that showed off his muscular frame. He had an AK-47 slung over his shoulder and a 9 mm pistol tucked into his waistband.

Abdas chuckled. "You are beginning to look like a South American."

"Hey, whatever it takes to get the job done, right?"

Raifa had spent the past year in Colombia carefully building relationships with some of the wealthiest drug cartels in the world. It had not been easy. These people didn't seem to trust anybody, but the one thing they understood was the value of a dollar.

The two men spoke in hushed tones in Farsi. "Is everything set up on the other end for us?" asked Abdas.

"Yes, we have the loads of coffee waiting, and I have gotten word from the American that our guy at the trucking company is on board."

"OK, good work, my brother. What about these guys unloading the plane?"

"They are expendable. You know what to do."

"Yes, we must be very cautious that no part of our plan can be leaked out."

The last of the crates was being loaded into the submarine. Raifa said, "We have to go, my brother" as he looked suspiciously at the sky. "May Allah bless our work. I will see you back in our beloved Persia in a few days."

"May Allah go with you. Soon, all the infidels in the world will know that there is no god but Allah," Abdas said as he smiled gleefully.

Raifa crawled down into the submarine, pulled the lid over the hatch, and they could hear the latch lock in place as he pulled the lid tightly against its seal. The men stood and watched as the submarine slowly sank, and in a matter of less than a minute, it disappeared below the surface of the murky water.

Abdas pulled his AK-47 off his shoulder and pointed it at the four men who had carried the crates down to the river. "Into the jungle," he barked.

The men just looked at him. Then he realized they couldn't understand him and he couldn't speak Spanish so he motioned toward the jungle. The men nodded and started walking up the path. As soon as they reached the edge of the jungle, Abdas and the other Iranians opened fire and cut them down.

The men quickly boarded the jet and in a matter of minutes were once again airborne.

Chapter 8

Patricia Scott woke from her nap when the flight attendant came on and said everyone needed to return to their seats and buckle up for their descent into Las Vegas. One thing Patricia had learned to do was to shut out whatever was going on in her head and calm down and rest when she had the chance. Now she was fully alert and ready to take on the task at hand.

When the plane finally stopped at the gate she retrieved her bag from the overhead bin and followed the slow procession down the aisle to the door.

As soon as she stepped onto the Jetway, a tall, thin man in a business suit stepped in front of her. "Are you Patricia Scott?" he asked.

"That depends on who is asking."

The man flashed an FBI badge and said, "Follow me."

They took the side door out of the Jetway and the stairs down to the tarmac where there was a black suburban waiting for them.

The man grabbed her bag, threw it in the back, and said, "Get in."

Patricia got in the back, and the man got into the front passenger seat. There was already a man behind the wheel who wasted no time speeding across the tarmac.

Only then did the man turn and offer his hand. "I am Special Agent Todd Friesen, and this is Special Agent Mike McGrath who is the best bomb expert in the country. Pleased to meet you."

"Nice to meet you too. Do you greet all your guests with such speedy limousine service?"

"No, but there is a sense of urgency with this one. We wanted to get on out there before you came, but the big boss insisted we wait for the little lady."

"Well, pardon me for holding you up. What exactly do you know? Anything new develop while I was in the air?"

"Not a thing. It's probably just a wild goose chase. Probably just some kids playing with fireworks."

"From what I saw that would be some pretty big fireworks."

They pulled up beside a black helicopter. The pilot had the engine running, ready to go. Patricia went around to the back of the SUV and retrieved her bag and headed for the chopper. The pilot turned and motioned for them to put their headsets on, which they did. In a matter of minutes, they were airborne and heading north, leaving Las Vegas behind.

Patricia gave the pilot the coordinates that Mike Pence had given her, and the pilot punched them into his GPS.

"ETA 33 minutes," the pilot said over the headset intercom system.

"So Patricia, or is it Patty? What exactly are we looking for?" Todd said over the intercom.

"It's Patricia, thank you very much," she said as she glared at him.

"Oh, sorry, I think I hit a nerve. Let's try this again. Patricia, what exactly are we looking for?"

"Have you seen the pictures?"

"No, what pictures?"

Patricia reached in her purse and pulled out the satellite picture and showed it to them.

"This just looks like a black spot in the desert. Could have been someone built a campfire. People still do that out here in the Wild West, you know."

Patricia was starting to get annoyed with this guy who seemed to think he was smarter than anyone else. "Well, whatever it is, it wasn't there 2 days ago. Yesterday morning, there were three cell phone calls from somewhere in this area to a known terrorist in Iran. We are not sure yet what it means, but it looks pretty suspicious to us."

"You people are always seeing a terrorist behind every rock. It's

probably just a coincidence.”

“Maybe, but, hey, it’s no accident we haven’t had a major terrorist attack since 9/11. Some of us are actually doing our job.”

“I detect a bit of cynicism in that voice, like maybe you think we aren’t doing ours,” Todd said defensively.

Patricia could detect that this was going downhill fast and she was going to have to work with these people so she smiled sweetly and said, “Oh no, not at all. I would never say that about such a fine organization as the FBI.”

Todd rolled his eyes and looked at Mike and said, “Why is it that these HSA agents always think they are a little smarter than the rest of us?”

“I don’t know, but at least they sent us a pretty one this time.”

Patricia decided to ignore that comment and looked out the window to the desert landscape they were passing over.

In her mind she sized up the people she was working with. Todd, tall, thin, and fiftyish with thinning grey hair and even greyer eyes, seemed to think he was pretty smart and liked to throw his weight around a bit.

Mike McGrath, on the other hand, she guessed was about 35 years old, 6 feet tall, and about 200 pounds of solid muscle. He seemed pretty quiet and had a serious look on his face, like he was always thinking about something. He was dressed in a faded T-shirt and blue jeans. With his blond hair and blue eyes he was very handsome and Patricia thought he probably had a lot of ladies swooning over him. She did notice that he had a wedding band on, so apparently some lady had gotten lucky.

Their pilot, who she had heard Todd address as Ron, was probably an ex-military pilot who had done his 20 years, retired with a pension, but still had some fire in his belly so he joined up with the FBI because he just loved to fly.

Patricia thought about the mission they were on and the implica-

tions of it if her suspicions were correct. She silently turned to her greatest source for strength and prayed. "Father God, I pray that you will give our little team on this helicopter wisdom today as we look at the evidence in the desert of Nevada. Please help us to determine if our country is in danger and give us the insight on how to protect it from that danger."

"ETA 3 minutes," the pilot barked into the intercom, bringing Patricia back to reality.

"We will need to land far enough away from the blast site to not disturb any of the evidence," Todd said.

Patricia looked down and could see the black spot that they had seen in the satellite photo. The pilot expertly set the chopper down on a flat area about 50 yards from the spot.

Patricia rummaged through her bag for her digital camera. This was a special camera with a satellite uplink on it that immediately uploaded the pictures to Mike Pence's computer in Chicago.

They started walking toward the pile of rocks and almost immediately started seeing debris that looked like pieces of a vehicle that had literally been blown to bits. There were small, shiny shards of glass everywhere, and here and there pieces of metal, none of them bigger than your hand.

Mike picked up a couple of pieces of shiny metal and said, "This didn't come from a vehicle. This is high-grade stainless steel."

"What does that mean?" Patricia asked.

"Well, it's probably part of the bomb, which means it wasn't just a simple pipe bomb that someone made in their garage. This looks like a professional job."

They reached the center of the blast site. There was a crater blown into the rocky soil about 15 feet in diameter and 3 feet deep. At one end of the crater were the remnants of what was left of an engine that was forcefully drilled into the ground.

Patricia started snapping pictures all around as Todd began digging

around the engine.

"These engines have a number on them, and we can use that to trace down the vehicle's origin," he said.

Patricia and Mike started making ever-widening circles around the crater looking for clues. She wished she had brought some shorts. The black pants and pullover sweater she had chosen for work this morning weren't really cutting it in this desert heat. She thought it must be a hundred or more out here.

Then she saw it. Body parts. A hand here, a foot there, scattered all over and almost totally unrecognizable. Mike came over and with a gloved hand picked up some pieces and put them into a plastic bag. "DNA evidence," he said flatly.

Patricia turned her head and gagged as she almost lost the scanty lunch they had served her on the plane.

She and Mike continued their circular trek around the crater. Mike reached down and picked up what looked like what was left of an electronic circuit board.

"What is that?" Patricia asked.

"I can't say for sure, but I'm guessing it's what's left of a cell phone activated detonation system."

Patricia turned her camera on video mode and started taking video of the whole area. Then she speed dialed Mike Pence and placed the ear bud in her ear so she could talk hands free.

"Hello, Patricia," Mike said in his usual bored-sounding voice.

"Mike, are you getting this video?"

"Yes, I am. It looks like there was a serious bang out there."

"You got that right. Do you see all these pieces of stainless steel? Can you check for known bomb-making procedures? We need to know where this thing came from."

"Can you give me any more specifics than a few jagged pieces of stainless steel?"

"How about this?" She moved her video camera to one of the piec

es. "Here is a piece with what looks like a welded seam."

"Bring whatever you can find back with you and we'll have it analyzed."

Patricia took her backpack that she had brought for that purpose and started filling it with bomb fragments.

When they were finished, Patricia and Mike walked back to where Todd had been digging around the engine. He was now sitting on the ground resting.

"Have any luck?" Patricia asked.

"Well, I know this much. Whoever blew this thing up took extra precautions not to have it identified. The engine casting number had been ground off."

"Can you tell what make and model it is?"

"I would say about a 2001 Dodge Caravan. We'll check the records for one that has been stolen. My guess is these people didn't blow up their personal family vehicle."

Suddenly, Todd's body slammed backward. A few seconds later, they heard the sharp report of a high-powered rifle. Patricia ran over and saw a red spot appear on his right shoulder.

"Todd, you've been shot! Come on, Mike, we've got to get him out of here."

Mike and Patricia grabbed Todd and raised him to his feet, and they headed for the chopper as bullets hit the rocks all around them.

"Must be a sniper over there on that hill," Mike yelled. "Good thing the chopper is behind this pile of rocks."

As they neared the chopper, the pilot saw them coming and started the engine. The huge rotor started turning and churning up the desert dust.

Mike and Patricia shoved Todd into the chopper and jumped in after him. "Go!" Mike yelled at the pilot. They were airborne before Patricia even had a chance to close the door.

Mike instructed the pilot to head to the nearest hospital.

Patricia turned her attention to Todd. "How bad is it?" she asked as she ripped his shirt open.

"I think it went straight through," Todd said.

Patricia put pressure on the wound to stop the bleeding. "Do you see anything of the sniper?" she hollered at Mike.

"No, he must have been hiding in those rocks way up on that hill. We don't have time to look for him now; we need to get Todd to the hospital."

As they flew over the desert, Patricia kept the pressure on Todd's shoulder and quietly prayed. She prayed for Todd's shoulder wound to not be too bad and for a speedy recovery. She prayed for Will at home in Plainfield. She prayed that God would give her the wisdom to figure out what was going on here.

When she finished she noticed that Todd was watching her. "What are you doing?" he said.

"I was praying for you."

"Thanks, but to tell you the truth, I never really put much faith in that. Never really thought God cared too much about me."

"Oh, you might be surprised how much he cares about you."

"If he cares so much about me, then why did he let me get shot?"

"Think about it this way. He cares so much that he kept that bullet from hitting its real mark, just a few inches to the left. We could be heading to the morgue right now instead of the hospital."

Todd fell silent, but Patricia noticed the fleeting look of fear in the tough man's eyes. She pressed on. "What do you think would have happened if that bullet would have met its mark? Are you ready to die?"

"In this line of work, you always know in the back of your mind that today could be the day, but I try not to think about that."

"So what if today would have been the day? Then what?"

"Well, you know, I've always lived a pretty good life. I think God would cut me some slack."

"Really? So you're one of the crowd that thinks God is sitting up

there with a big scale and he puts all your bad deeds on one side of the scale and all your good deeds on the other side of the scale. He weighs them out, and if your good deeds weigh more than your bad deeds, he lets you into heaven. But if your bad deeds weigh more than your good deeds, then he sends you to hell.”

“I guess so. Something like that.”

“Well, that’s the biggest lie ever told. The truth is that none of us are ever going to be good enough to get into heaven because we are all sinners and no sin can ever enter into a perfect place like heaven or it wouldn’t be perfect anymore.”

“OK, so how do you get to heaven?”

“The Bible teaches that the only way to get to heaven is through faith in Jesus Christ. God sent his Son to die on the cross as a penalty for our sin so we don’t have to pay that penalty and all we have to do is have faith in him.”

“I don’t know. That sounds too easy.”

“It’s simple, but it’s not easy. It means giving up control of our own destiny and putting our faith in Jesus Christ. Sometimes that’s hard, but once you’ve done that, you will have a peace that you have never had before.”

“Is that why you seem so calm and peaceful?”

“That’s right. I know that if I’m killed I will instantly be in a better place.”

The pilot was landing on the helipad on top of Mercy Hospital in Las Vegas. As soon as they touched down, a team of doctors and nurses opened the doors and rushed in to take Todd out.

“Think about it,” Patricia said to Todd.

“I will, thanks,” he said as they put him on a stretcher and wheeled him into the building.

Patricia turned to the pilot. “Can you take me to the airport? I need to get back to Chicago.”

“Sure, no problem.”

"I'll stay here with Todd," Mike said.

Patricia pulled a business card out of her pocket and handed it to Mike. "Here's my card. Call me with any new information on the evidence we gathered and keep me updated on Todd's progress."

"I'll do that."

"Thanks for your help today."

They lifted off, and Patricia looked out over the magnificent view of Las Vegas at night. What an amazing display of light as far as the eye could see. Maybe on some other occasion she could have enjoyed the sights, but tonight, she only felt a sense of foreboding. She wasn't sure why, but she sensed that something big was about to happen and every fiber of her being was determined to stop it.

Chapter 9

Will Scott parked his pickup truck in front of Plainview Community Church. This church had been started about 10 years ago by Scott's high school friend Rick Simons.

Will was pretty skeptical at first. After all, he had known Rick as a teenager, and he sure didn't seem like preacher material then. Will and Patricia started attending a few times here and there and soon fell in love with the church.

Rick was a straightforward man who wasn't afraid to tell it like it is. He had the ability to take complex pieces of scripture and break them down into everyday language that everyone could understand.

Tonight, their small group was meeting, as they did every week, for a Bible study. Pastor Rick was the leader of their group, but if he couldn't be there because of other pastoral duties, he would often call on Will to lead the group.

Tonight was one of those nights. Someone in the congregation's mother had passed away, so Rick needed to go spend some time with the family.

Will went in and started the coffee brewing and prepared for the rest of the group to come.

As the others arrived, someone brought some cookies, and they all filled their coffee cups or grabbed a bottle of water out of the fridge.

Someone asked Will, "Where's Patricia?"

"She had to be out of town today," Will answered.

"Where did she go this time?" someone asked.

"I don't know. You know how her job is."

"Doesn't that drive you nuts, not knowing where she is or what kind of danger she's in?"

“Oh, not really. Her job is more in the intelligence gathering field and really isn’t that dangerous.”

“Just the same, I don’t know if I could handle not knowing where my spouse is all the time.”

Will’s phone started vibrating; he looked at the caller ID. “Speaking of Patricia, here she is. Excuse me a minute. I better get this.” Will got up and walked out of the room.

Normally Will didn’t answer his phone during their study time and Patricia knew that so if she was calling now it must be important.

“Hello, beautiful,” Will said sweetly.

“Hey, baby, sorry to bother you. I just noticed what time it is, but I had to quick call you.”

“You sound upset. Are you alright?”

“Aside from getting shot at by a sniper and being a human tourniquet for an hour I’m just fine.”

“Shot at? What? Where are you?”

“You know I can’t tell you that. I am on my way home though. I’m fine; just have the group pray for a guy named Todd. He’s the one who got shot today.”

“We will. How bad is he hurt?”

“Not too bad, just a flesh wound. He’ll survive. I had a chance to witness to him in the chopper. He needs Jesus, so pray for his soul.”

“Chopper? Witnessing? Where are you? I’m coming after you right now!”

“No, I said I’m on my way. I’ll call you when I get to Chicago.”

“OK, what time will that be?”

“Late, probably 2 A.M. And one other thing. Please don’t forget to have the group pray for our country. I have this very bad feeling about this whole thing.”

“Oh boy, there you go with that feeling thing again.”

“You know it’s my female intuition, and when it kicks in, I’m usually right.”

Will wasn't about to argue with that. He had learned a long time ago that Patricia had this uncanny ability to "feel" things about people and situations, and she usually turned out to be right in the end. Like the guy that showed up in church one Sunday that Will befriended the way he always did all the new people. Patricia had said, "There is something about that man that just isn't right. I can feel it."

"Oh, he seems nice enough," Will insisted.

A few weeks later when the man was arrested for child pornography Patricia just smiled smugly.

"So what is this feeling thing telling you?" Will asked.

"I can't really say, but you know what my job description is so that should be enough to tell you it's not good."

"OK, be careful; see ya when you get home."

"Love you. Bye."

"Love you too. Bye."

Will walked back into the room where they were to have their Bible study.

Alice must have noticed the worried look on his face. "Oh my gosh! Is everything OK? That was Patricia. Is she alright?" She got up from her chair and gave Will a big hug.

"Patricia is fine, but she does have some prayer requests. She was shot at today by a sniper. She wasn't hurt, but some Todd guy that was with her was. She wants us to pray for him. She also said she wants us to pray for our country. She has a feeling something big is about to happen."

Bob asked, "Something big? What does that mean?"

"Well, as you all know, Patricia works for the Department of Homeland Security in the Antiterrorism Division, so whatever it means, it can't be good."

"Right, like maybe another 9/11," Bob said.

Alice spoke up. "I think we need to pray for the Muslims who are planning these attacks. Jesus said to pray for our enemies."

Bob asked, “Why do you say ‘pray for the Muslims’? How do you know they are the ones planning the attacks?”

“Well, just look at their track record over the last 20 years. Can you name one terrorist attack that wasn’t instigated by Muslims?”

Bob thought a moment and said, “I guess you’re right. It’s just that I work with some Muslims, and they don’t seem like the type that would blow stuff up.”

Will interjected, “True, but it seems at the core of their religion is the desire to rule the world, and from what I have learned about the Koran, it teaches that anyone who doesn’t adopt the Muslim religion is an infidel and should be killed.”

The group decided to skip their study and just spend more time in prayer. They prayed for Patricia, for Todd, for the safety of America, and for the Muslims who were, that very minute, planning some very evil things for America.

Chapter 10

Raifa Hemati sat in the darkness of the submarine. He hated everything about his present situation. He hated the close quarters, the damp smell, and most of all, he hated the people he was with.

The submarine was built for a specific purpose and comfort wasn't it. He sat on a makeshift seat that looked like an old apple crate. The only light came from the instrument panel of the pilot. The pilot had insisted they cut the rest of the lights to save energy.

The drug cartels had used the narco subs for years to smuggle drugs from Colombia to Mexico, where the drugs would then be smuggled across the border into the United States. Those subs were only partly submersible. The cockpit and intake and exhaust pipes for the engine stuck out of the water.

While these subs were very hard to detect in the water because there was so little to see above the surface, the Americans patrolling the water with their boats and airplanes had succeeded in capturing several of them.

This sub was different. It could be totally submerged, making it almost impossible to detect. By narco sub standards it was huge, almost 100 feet long. A large portion of that length was filled with batteries. The batteries were charged by a diesel engine, but the engine could only be run when the sub was at the surface where it could operate semisubmerged.

The reason they chose this sub was because it carried enough batteries to make their entire trip completely submerged. Raifa had insisted they start their voyage fully charged; he didn't want to take a chance that they might be spotted in the open ocean if they had to surface to charge the batteries.

Besides Raifa there were four other men in the submarine. It took two people to pilot the sub and one to control the ballast which determined their depth. The other to control their speed and direction.

Raifa was fascinated with the high-tech instruments they had installed in the sub. There was a sonar and a GPS tracking system. Apparently, there were underwater video cameras on all sides of the sub because in front of the pilot were four large video screens that gave underwater views in every direction.

The pilot sat in the front of the submarine in a chair that looked like the bucket seat out of a sports car. He controlled a stick that controlled a rudder and a lever that controlled the amount of power that was transferred to the electric motor that turned a huge propeller at the rear of the sub.

Raifa sized up his companions. They all appeared to be in their mid-twenties, well groomed young men that obviously spent some time working out. They were part of the drug cartel's militia, and it was obvious the way they handled themselves they had had some good military-type training. They all had pistols and knives strapped to their belts, and there was a stash of AK-47s close by.

The sub was whisper quiet; all that could be heard was the soft whirr of the electric motor.

The four Colombians would rotate shifts so they could keep moving 24 hours a day. There were little makeshift wooden bunks where they could sleep during their time off.

After about 12 hours of monotony, Raifa decided it was time to get some sleep. He turned to one of the crew members and asked in English if he could use one of the bunks. In the last year Raifa had honed his Spanish skills to the point that few could even detect an accent, but he thought it might be to his advantage if these men didn't know that just yet.

He was now fluent in four languages: Farsi, Arabic, English, and Spanish. Raifa's parents had insisted that he take Arabic classes in

school, and then when he went to college in London, he had studied English and took a few courses in Spanish. To Raifa, it had become a challenge to conquer a language to the point that he could speak it as good as a native person.

One of the men motioned to a bunk on the left side and said, "*Puede dormir aqui*," meaning, "You can sleep here."

Raifa crawled in, and he was soon sound asleep.

Sometime later, Raifa woke to the sound of voices. Years of espionage training had taught him to be discreet and to use every opportunity to see what he could learn. He heard the men speaking to each other in Spanish.

"Do you have any idea what is in those crates?"

"I don't know, but the big boss said it was none of our business and the less we know the better."

"It must be something very valuable for big boss to agree to transport it in his sub. You know he makes millions of dollars for every trip we make with drugs. These guys, whoever they are, must be paying the boss a butt load of money or he wouldn't even consider it."

"I don't know. The payload is too small for it to be drugs. We usually barely have room to move when we're hauling dope."

"OK, so what is more valuable than drugs? We can carry 250,000,000 dollars' worth of cocaine on one trip. What could possibly be more valuable than that?"

"I don't know of anything except maybe gold."

"That's it! That has to be it. Those crates are full of gold!"

One of the men stood up and said, "Well, I'm done guessing. I'm going to find out for myself."

"What about their guard back there?" one of them asked.

"He's sound asleep. I'll be right back." He started making his way to the back of the vessel.

The man pulled his knife out of his belt and went to work on a board at the corner of one of the crates.

Raifa had heard the whole conversation. He quietly got up and made his way back through the darkness to where the man was bent over the crate. While he was very busy prying up the next board, Raifa came quietly up behind him, reached down, and grabbed the man's hair with his left hand, gave a quick yank as he brought his knife up with his right hand, and slit the man's throat. Raifa slowly let the body down to the floor, and then took his knife and completely severed the man's head. Then he made his way quietly back to the front of the submarine.

The three men in the front were still quietly talking among themselves. The pilot said, "I wonder what's taking José so long back there? Jaime, maybe you better go check on him."

"That won't be necessary," Raifa said in perfect Spanish as he tossed José's head into the middle of their huddle.

All three men screamed and jumped from their seats simultaneously as they reached for their weapons.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you," Raifa said in a voice that was as cold as steel.

They saw that he had a gun in each hand leveled at them, but it was the look in his eyes that made them drop their weapons. Black eyes that flashed pure hatred like nothing they had ever seen before.

"Consider this a warning that you will not do anything to jeopardize this mission unless you want to meet the same fate as your friend here."

"Holy cow! You are one crazy bastard," one of them exclaimed.

"Yes, I am, but I get things done. Now, get back in your seats and let's keep this thing moving."

Chapter 11

Patricia Scott rolled into the office in Naperville right on time. Even though she hadn't gotten home until 3 A.M., she prided herself in never being late. She went by the break room and grabbed a cup of coffee as she headed to her office.

Justin met her in the hallway. "Welcome home. Write your report and meet me in my office in 30 minutes."

"Thirty minutes? What do you think I am? Some kind of speed-typing wizard?"

"I have confidence that you can handle it," Justin said as he disappeared into his office.

Patricia sat at her desk and tried to recollect all the details of the past 24 hours as she typed furiously on her keyboard.

Thirty minutes later, she printed out her report and headed down the hall to refill her cup of coffee on her way to Justin's office.

Mike Pence was in the break room grabbing a Dr. Pepper. "How in the world can you drink that nasty stuff, especially at 8:30 in the morning?" Patricia asked.

"Hey, it's no worse than that nasty coffee that you drink by the gallon."

"This morning, I need all the caffeine I can get. So have you had any luck with those pictures I sent you?"

"Luck? Luck is not a factor! You should never downgrade my amazing God-given abilities to the lowly level of just luck."

Patricia smiled at his lame attempt at humor. "OK, so tell me what have your amazing God-given abilities revealed to you, O thou great and wondrous Mr. Pence."

"In a minute. We must hurry to the big boss's office before he

starts yelling at us.”

Patricia and Mike walked down the hall and entered Justin’s large, spacious office. Patricia was always amazed at how neat and clean his office was. Her desk always seemed to be cluttered with papers, Post-it Notes, files and folders, pens, etc. But not Justin’s. Everything seemed to have its place from the brass nameplate to the stapler. Everything was always in exactly the same spot.

Justin was dressed in his customary dark business suit and tie. He was the only one in the building that wore a suit, but it went well with his meticulous fetish for detail. Former marine sergeant, he still had that short haircut and air of authority that made everyone around him feel like they should give a salute.

Patricia laid her freshly printed report on Justin’s desk. He picked it up and briefly scanned over it as he muttered under his breath, “Please sit down.”

Mike and Patricia took their seats in the comfortable leather chairs in front of Justin’s dark cherry-colored desk. The whole room was decorated in rich cherry wood, making it appear like some wealthy lawyer’s office. A total contrast to the rest of the offices in the building that were filled with metal desks and rows of dull file cabinets.

Justin looked up from Patricia’s report and frowned as he said, “So did we learn anything on this trip, or was it another waste of taxpayer money?”

Patricia replied, “Well, we learned that whoever is behind this thing will stop at nothing to keep us from finding out the truth. Have you heard anything from Nevada on the sniper?”

“The FBI is checking on it. To tell you the truth, I don’t have much faith in them finding anything. The trail was too cold by the time they got there.”

“Fortunately, the guy wasn’t the best shot in the world, but I guess from a mile away he wasn’t too bad either. My question is, how did this guy know we were there in the first place?”

Justin turned to Mike. “Have you been able to get any new

information from the pictures and videos?"

"Well, we know the make and model of the van. The FBI is still working on that angle."

"What about the bomb?"

"It appears to have been some type of sealed unit that was detonated with a satellite-activated cell-phone receiver."

"When you say a sealed unit, what do you mean by that?"

"I mean once the unit is assembled, the ends are welded shut so that it is very difficult, maybe even impossible, to deactivate it."

Justin leaned back in his chair and furrowed his brow, deep in thought. "So here is what we know. The phone call that activated this thing probably came from Iran. More specifically, it came from the phone of Abdas Hemati himself. This bomb was most likely made so that even if it was found, there would have been no way to deactivate it without setting it off. So we have to assume this was some sort of test for something bigger to come. Any ideas on what that might be?"

Patricia said thoughtfully, "We know that Hemati is the head of Iran's nuclear program, which brings me to one conclusion. These people are planning a nuclear attack on this country very soon. That might explain the stainless steel casing. They would want to make sure no radiation could leak out of the bomb and be detected."

"Now let's stick to the facts," Justin said. "The State Department says Iran is still 2 or 3 years away from having nuclear weapons capabilities."

Mike spoke up. "The State Department is in denial of the facts. Even if Iran doesn't have the capability to make the weapons themselves, they have become cozy enough with nations that are in the nuclear club lately that they could easily get their hands on nuclear weapons at any time."

"So what is your best guess? Russia, Pakistan, China, North Korea? Who do you think would be most willing to work with them?"

They all thought for a few minutes, and finally Patricia spoke, as if she was thinking out loud. "Russia maybe, although I doubt it. They

are smart enough to know what Iran would attempt to do with them, and they wouldn't want to spark another cold war with us. Pakistan? No, we have people in there keeping a very close eye on their nuclear arsenal. China? They would be foolish to jeopardize their relationship with the United States. They need our trade dollars like a heroin addict needs drugs. That leaves North Korea, and their president is just about as crazy as the president of Iran. I vote North Korea."

Justin said, "I would have to agree. I will instruct all our teams to focus on Iranian and North Korean communications and travel over the past 6 months."

He then turned to Mike. "OK, it's time to put those brains of yours to work. Can you hack into North Korea's air traffic control system?"

"Are you kidding me? Do you have any idea how many layers of encryption those communists have on their computer systems?"

"I don't have any idea, but I'm sure you can figure something out."

Mike grinned. "This is awesome. I get to do things legally that normal people would go to jail for."

"Just remember why you are doing it. It's our job to stop these nuts or a lot of good people are going to die."

"What do you want me to focus on?" Patricia asked.

Justin turned to address her. "Patricia, I want you to put everything you've got into finding Abdas Hemati. Pull his file and review everything we have on him. I'll get in contact with the CIA and see if they know his whereabouts. If what we suspect is true, then we need to take this guy out as soon as possible. Now go get to work."

Mike and Patricia got up and headed down the hall to their offices. "Yippee, we get to play supersleuth!" Mike quipped gleefully.

Patricia grabbed him by the arm and turned him toward her. "Mike, you are such a dork. Do you have any idea how serious this is? The safety of our entire country rests on you and me right now! If we fail, millions of people could die."

"Oh, come on, Patty, you don't really think anyone is evil enough

to set off a nuclear weapon just for kicks, do you?”

Patricia glared at him. “Oh yes. You haven’t studied these people like I have. Their goal is to have a worldwide caliphate, which means to bring the whole world under Islamic *Sharia* law. The only way they can do that is to take the United States down, and they know they wouldn’t stand a chance in a head-on confrontation with the greatest military force on earth, so they have to use unconventional means to bring us down, and if it means killing several million Americans, that’s just too bad.”

Mike stepped back a step and raised his hands. “OK, sorry for setting off your hot button.”

“Make no mistake, Mike, if one of those bombs goes off in Chicago, you will be blasted into eternity within 1 second, and all across the Middle East people will be dancing in the streets because to them, Mike Pence is an infidel that deserves to die because you don’t believe in their Allah.”

“Now wait a minute, I believe in God. They believe in Allah. Isn’t that the same thing? Kind of like some people are Baptists and some are Methodists, but they all believe in the same God, right?”

Patricia looked at him sadly. “Unfortunately, that is what a lot of people think, but it is absolutely not true. We believe in a God who—”

“Hey, are you two going to get to work or stand there and discuss theology all day?” Justin barked at them. They had been so intent on their discussion that they hadn’t noticed him walking down the hallway toward them.

“Sorry, boss,” Patricia said. “I was just trying to educate this infidel a little bit.”

“I don’t doubt that he could use some educating but please save it for another day.”

“Right.” Patricia turned and entered her office.

Mike entered his office as he muttered under his breath. “Education? I’ve got more education than both of those two put together.”

Chapter 12

Raifa watched patiently as the crew of the submarine continued to navigate through the Caribbean Sea. The three remaining crew members had been very quiet since he had eliminated one of their men for trying to open one of the crates.

The men drove the sub mostly by the sophisticated GPS system. Raifa found it interesting to watch the underwater television monitors. Since the Caribbean water was crystal clear, they could see all kinds of aquatic life swimming freely in the water all around the submarine. Sharks would come up and bump against the side of the big hulking beast like they were trying to figure out what kind of fish had invaded their territory.

Once a group of bottle-nosed dolphins swam alongside the submarine for what must have been miles. They could see the dolphins disappear for a while as they surfaced to breathe, then after a few minutes, they would be back swimming alongside the sub like they were the best of pals.

Raifa could tell when night fell on the surface because the ocean went black with just faint moonlight filtering through.

Now the water was just lighting up on the morning of the second day of their voyage. Raifa noticed that the water wasn't as clear as it had been the night before, which told him they were getting close to their destination.

The pilot said, "We'll be in port in approximately 1 hour."

Raifa pulled a cell phone from his pocket and sent a text message to a man in Nicaragua. "FISHING BOAT WILL BE HOME IN 1 HOUR."

Rahan Najafi looked up from his breakfast as his cell phone vibrated. He flipped the phone open and read the text message. "FISHING

BOAT WILL BE HOME IN 1 HOUR.” Rahan didn’t recognize the number, but that wasn’t too unusual for his contact to get a new cell phone. They did that quite frequently to avoid detection.

Rahan had been in Nicaragua for 5 years now. He had been sent by the Iranian government to set up a supply route to smuggle drugs into America. He had been very successful and had gotten paid very well.

Rahan had been chosen for three reasons. First of all, for his commitment to Islam, and more important was his belief in the vision of a worldwide caliphate. Second was his superb intelligence. He had been the top student in his class at school and from there had attended the Amirkabir University of Technology in Tehran. Rahan had excelled in engineering while in school and had been recruited by the Iranian military right after college.

The third reason Rahan had been selected for this job was because of his appearance. With his dark skin, round face, brown eyes, and black hair, he looked like he could be a native of Central America.

Rahan had picked up the Spanish language quickly and spoke it flawlessly. The people of Bluefields, Nicaragua, thought he was a native of Leon. Rahan had spent some time in Leon in the beginning so he could collect enough facts to make his story sound believable.

Rahan had even found a woman in Bluefields and had gotten married. Planning for the wedding was a little awkward. The Nicaraguans loved to have big wedding celebrations and when he said he didn’t have any relatives to invite to the ceremony they started to get suspicious. But Rahan, or Juan Gonzales, as he was known by everyone around him, was quick to come up with a fancy tale about how his family had all been killed by the Sandinistas during the revolution of 1979.

Alita was a beautiful woman, but that wasn’t the only thing that attracted Rahan to her. She was the only child of José Sanchez, the owner of one of the largest coffee plantations in Nicaragua.

José had quickly taken Juan under his wing, so to speak, and taught him everything he needed to know about the coffee business. They

worked together for over a year before the tragic accident.

José had always been a very careful driver on the treacherous mountain roads that surrounded Bluefields. One day, José and his wife had been up in the mountains checking on one of the coffee fields. When they didn't return at dusk, Alita insisted that a search party be sent out. Their vehicle was discovered smoldering at the bottom of a cliff far below the road that followed a ridge around the mountain.

Of course, no one suspected their son-in-law could have possibly been involved. They just blindly accepted that something happened to take them over the edge that day.

So Juan and Alita inherited the coffee plantation. The coffee business was the perfect cover for Juan's "other" activities.

Alita objected at first when Juan insisted that they needed armed guards on the property 24 hours a day, but Juan soon convinced her that the crime rate in the area was going up and he just wanted her to always be protected.

Business had been good for Juan. The Americans seemed to have an endless demand for the two things he could provide: coffee and cocaine.

Juan had perfected a method to hide cocaine within the bags of coffee, and since his coffee business was legitimate, no one suspected a thing. He knew that the day would come when he would be called on to do what he was sent to Nicaragua for and today was that day.

Juan turned to Alita and said, "I need to go check on the workers down in the south coffee field, then I will be going to the warehouse and getting a shipment ready to go out later today."

"OK, love," Alita said.

Juan went out and crawled into the large Mercedes Benz panel truck that was parked in front of the house. As he started the diesel engine, he motioned for the guards that were stationed in front of the house to join him. One of the men climbed up into the passenger seat while two more clambered onto the back of the truck.

Juan headed down the road toward Bluefields for about a mile, then turned south on a dirt trail that wound through his coffee fields. The truck bounced along as they followed a winding road through some dense forest until they came to a long hill where the trail led down to a river.

Juan had specifically selected this spot for several reasons. First of all, it was on his property so he could control who had access to it. Second, the river here was deep and calm and was only a few miles from the bay, and from there led right into the Caribbean. Third was the huge trees that lined the riverbank, and dense foliage gave perfect cover for their operation.

Juan pulled the truck up to what looked like a wooden fishing pier that reached about 50 feet out into the water.

The sun was just rising over the ocean, and as it began to warm the jungle there was a steamy fog that limited visibility to about 50 yards. There was nothing to do now but wait.

Juan instructed the guards to go to their lookout stations, one up-river, one downriver, and one back up the trail like they had done many times before.

After about 10 minutes, Juan's cell phone vibrated. He checked the screen. "ARE WE CLEAR?"

"ALL CLEAR," he texted back.

Within minutes, he saw the periscope from the submarine come into view as it glided silently into place at the end of the dock. Slowly, the sub surfaced until the hatch was completely exposed at the end of the dock. Juan grabbed a rope and tied the sub to the dock as someone inside opened the hatch.

Raifa climbed out through the hatch, followed by the three Colombians. They all took some deep breaths of fresh air. "Man, I almost forgot what good clean air smells like," Raifa said. "I've had about enough of recycled Venezuelan air."

Raifa turned to Juan and shook his hand. "Good to meet you, my

friend,” he said.

“Good to meet you too,” Juan replied. They didn’t use their names, which really wasn’t unusual in the drug trade. Most of the people in the trade used nicknames or no name at all. The less that was known about you the better for survival.

But Juan and Raifa exchanged a knowing look. They had actually worked with each other years ago in Iran.

“Let’s get this thing unloaded,” Raifa barked at the Colombians.

They looked at him bewildered. “Where is the crew that usually unloads us?” one of them asked.

“They couldn’t make it today,” Juan said. “It’s a small load. We can handle it today.”

The Colombians grumbled under their breath as they crawled back into the sub. They quickly handed the six crates up to Juan and Raifa, who slid them away from the sub on the dock.

When they were finished, they came up and carried the crates over and loaded them onto the truck. Juan tied the crates down and covered them with a tarp.

Raifa turned to the Colombians and said, “OK, get in that sub and get out of here before someone sees you.”

“We’re not leaving until we get paid.”

“Your boss will pay you when you get back. We have made arrangements with him. Now get out of here before I lose my temper,” Raifa said between clenched teeth as he pulled a gun from his belt and cocked it.

The Colombians grudgingly got back into the sub and closed the hatch behind themselves. Within a few minutes, they were gone and the surface of the river was totally quiet once again.

Juan turned to Raifa and said in Farsi, “I thought there were supposed to be four crewmembers on that sub.”

“There were. One of them had a bit of an accident. Seems like his head and his shoulders weren’t getting along anymore.”

"You are one sick SOB," Juan said.

"All in the name of Allah, my friend. They are only infidels, and infidels are expendable for the sake of Allah and the caliphate that we are about to expand to the world," said Raifa as he reached for his cell phone. "Excuse me while I make a quick phone call."

Raifa looked up a number that he had saved earlier in his address book and pressed SEND. Downriver they heard a muffled explosion.

Juan looked at Raifa and grinned. "Did you just do what I think you just did?"

Raifa laughed. "It was quite simple really. I just placed a small charge under one of the batteries when they weren't looking. It didn't need to be very big. Just enough to blow a hole in the side of the sub and let it fill up with water. Right now, they are sinking to the bottom of that deep hole I saw on the depth finder as we came into the river.

"Remember, total secrecy is our friend on this mission. All it would take is for one of those guys to start talking and it could blow up our whole operation."

"What about their boss? When his sub doesn't come back, he's not going to be a happy camper, and believe me, you don't want this drug cartel mad at you."

"Don't worry, we'll buy him a new sub. You worry too much. Everything will be just fine. Now let's get out of here."

Juan whistled and his three guards came out of the shadows and boarded the truck. Juan and Raifa got in the front, and they started the trek back up the hill to the coffee warehouse. When they reached the dock, Juan carefully backed the truck up to the dock on the back side of the building that was out of sight from the main highway out front. They quickly unloaded their cargo.

"What's in those crates?" one of the guards asked. "We've never handled anything like that before."

Raifa turned to him and said, "This, my dear friends, is the wave of the future. Inside these crates is a substance that will light up the lives

of millions of people. After they get a taste of this stuff, they will never want anything else.” Raifa turned his head and winked at Juan.

Juan said, “Come on, guys, and quit just standing around. Let’s get these crates on pallets and cover them with bags of coffee just like we usually do.”

One of the men quickly started taking empty pallets off a nearby stack and laid them out on the floor while another one of the guards got on a forklift and grabbed pallets of coffee.

The coffee was packaged in 20-pound bags. They quickly restacked the coffee around the crates and over the top, then they stretch wrapped the whole pallet with clear shipping stretch wrap. When they had finished with all six pallets they looked just like any other pallet of coffee in the warehouse that was ready for shipment.

Juan ordered the men to load the pallets into the front of a trailer that was backed up to the dock, and then fill the rest of the trailer with regular pallets of coffee. There were 20 pallets in all, making what appeared to be a full load of coffee heading north to the Starbucks-addicted Americans.

Juan and Raifa stepped to one side and talked excitedly in Farsi as the men were loading the truck.

Raifa said, “Can you believe this is finally happening, my friend?”

Juan smiled as he watched the men loading the truck. “We have worked so long and hard to make this happen. Truly, Allah has granted us his blessing in helping us get this far.”

“Yes, Allah is good. Soon, the whole world will know that there is no god but Allah and Mohammed is his true prophet. So what is the plan from here?”

“You will be going with me to take this load to the United States.”

“But how will I be able to cross the borders along the way? I don’t even have a visa to be in this country.”

“It is all taken care of, my friend. Trust me, I have connections. Your new ID papers are in the truck. You are now a citizen of the great

country of Nicaragua. Your name is Denis Gonzales. We're brothers."

"Brothers? I mean, I always liked you and all, but brothers?"

"Hey, you have to admit we do kind of look alike, and I thought it might make it easier because it would make more sense that we were traveling together."

"OK, so we are brothers. Looks like the truck is loaded. Shall we hit the road?"

"Just a minute. I have to call my wife and let her know I'll be gone for a few days."

"Wife? You have a wife?"

"Yes, absolutely. Do you have a problem with that?"

"Does she know what you do?"

"No, she thinks I'm just a coffee farmer. A very *successful* coffee farmer, I might add."

"Do you love her?"

"No, of course not. She has just been a tool to get what I needed for the cause. You see, her parents used to own this coffee plantation."

"What do you mean, used to?"

"I mean before they died. It seems they met a quite untimely death some time ago." Juan winked at Raifa and couldn't help but grin.

Raifa shook his head and smiled. "If you are saying what I think you're saying, you are one sick dude."

"Hey, anything for the cause of Allah, right?"

Juan pulled out his cell phone and called Alita. She picked up on the second ring. "Hello, baby," she said.

"Hey, honey, I just wanted to let you know that I'm going to be gone for a few days. I need to take this load of coffee north."

"Why do you have to take it? What happened to your driver?"

"Well, Carlos is sick and the load really needs to go now."

"I really wish you wouldn't. You know how dangerous it is in Mexico with all the drug wars going on. I'm going to be really worried about you."

"Don't worry, honey; I can take care of myself."

"OK, be careful."

Raifa and Rahan went outside the building and crawled up into the cab of a late-model Peterbilt. This truck spoke of the success of Rahan's business. Most trucks in Central America were worn-out rigs that were shipped down from the United States after they were too old for the U.S. truckers to drive anymore. But not Rahan's truck. This truck was a deep gold color with lots of chrome that was polished to a mirror finish. On the side of the truck in bold black letters was his logo that identified the truck as belonging to the Bluefields Coffee Company.

Rahan ignited the 500 horsepower Detroit diesel engine and let the air pressure build up as he showed Raifa around the spacious cab of the Peterbilt.

The sleeper was equipped with two beds. The bottom bed was the size of a queen bed and the top bunk folded up against the back wall of the sleeper. Mounted in one of the front corners was a TV, and on the other side was a small microwave oven.

Rahan said, "Now, let me show you something." He took his fist and pounded as hard as he could against the front of the bed frame. Raifa watched in amazement as the bed suddenly lifted on spring-loaded hinges to reveal a secret compartment underneath that was filled with all kinds of artillery. There were several AK-47s, several handguns, stacks of ammunition, and even a grenade launcher.

"Wow! I see you believe in being prepared!" Raifa exclaimed.

"You bet. Where we're going you never know what to expect so I had this custom made so that there is no way to detect this compartment from the outside. I had that special latch system made so that it can only be activated by a major pounding on the front. All the hinges are internal so that no customs agent can detect anything."

"Has it been tested?"

"Oh yes, we have had this truck across the border many times and

have had customs agents going over it with a fine-tooth comb and they have never found anything.”

Rahan pulled the truck away from the dock, went back, and closed the doors and locked them with a padlock. He climbed back in behind the wheel and said, “Let’s go truckin’!”

Chapter 13

Dirk Pierson addressed his team of dispatchers. It was Friday morning, and like any other Friday, they were having a little informal meeting over coffee. They used this time to discuss the various issues of the week. There were always things to discuss, like a truck that broke down on the road, and then they could discuss steps to prevent that from happening in the future.

Today, the big topic was a driver that had been nailed in their random drug testing program for using cocaine. Scott Trucking had a zero tolerance policy so if anyone got caught using drugs they were automatically terminated. The problem was this guy was somewhere in Florida so they had to figure out a way to get somebody down there to pick up his truck, and to make matters worse, the truck was loaded with 45,000 pounds of oranges that were going to rot in the heat of the Florida sun if they didn't get them out of Florida soon.

Dirk was angry; this was one stress he didn't need today. "Bill, do we have any drivers available that we can send to Florida today to pick that truck up?"

"There are a few that have come home for the weekend already. Probably Louis Garza would be your best bet."

"OK, get him a plane ticket ASAP and get it taken care of."

Dirk's phone vibrated, indicating that he had a text message. He looked down and read the message. "IT'S TIME; MEET ME AT FRIDAY PRAYERS AT THE AL-AQSA MOSQUE."

Dirk looked up from his phone, his face turning white.

"What's wrong?" Bill asked "You look like you just saw a ghost or something."

"Oh, it's nothing really. I'm going to need to leave early today. My

uncle is in the hospital, and I need to go see him."

"No problem. We can handle it. What's your uncle's problem?"

"Well, uh . . . uh, he . . . uh, he's having trouble with his heart. You know, too many french fries, I guess," Dirk never was very good at lying.

"Well, you just go ahead. We'll take care of everything."

"Thanks, guys. I'll go report to Will." Dirk left the conference room and walked down the hall to Will's office. Will was poring over the latest quarterly profit-and-loss report from Scott Trucking as Dirk entered his office. Without lifting his head, he said, "Dirk, can you explain to me why our labor costs went up \$15,000 last quarter, but our sales volume stayed about the same?"

"Well, good morning to you too," Dirk replied as he took a seat in front of Will's desk. "Yes, I can. We have had to hire several new drivers to replace some of these jerks that can't seem to stay off drugs, like the one that got nailed in Florida this morning, and you know that always costs money to train these guys."

"Do you mean to tell me we had another one?"

"Oh yes, and of course, his truck is in Florida loaded with oranges. But, hey, don't worry. It's all been taken care of."

"Thanks, you're a good man."

"Will, I need to take some time off today. My uncle, you know, is in the hospital, and I need to go see him."

Will looked at him as he tried to control his anger. "Does your Muslim religion really allow you to lie like that? I just saw your uncle Harry at Sharon's Restaurant a few minutes ago, and he looked just fine to me. Don't try to kid me. It's Friday, and you plan to go to that mosque for Friday prayers, right?"

"You know I never really was very good at lying. You're right, but it's been a while since I've been there, and I just need to go to get refreshed again."

Will studied Dirk for a moment. "OK, I'll make you a deal. I will

let you have the rest of the day off if you will go with Patricia and me to a Christian concert tonight.”

“A Christian concert? Now, you talk about two words that don’t belong in the same sentence. I believe that is what you call an oxymoron or something like that.”

“Believe me, it’s not what you think.”

“The few times I went to church as a kid I just remember this awful, slow, mournful music that was really boring.”

“Well, Christian music has come a long way since then, and I think you would enjoy it.”

“OK, sounds like a plan; I will go with you this one time, but don’t expect me to be making a habit of it,” Dirk said as he got up and headed for the door.

As soon as Dirk left, Will sent a text to Patricia’s phone. “GET 3 TICKETS FOR THE CONCERT TONIGHT. DIRK IS GOING WITH US.”

He soon had a reply. “THANK YOU, JESUS.”



Dirk pulled into the parking lot of the al-Aqsa Mosque at 10 minutes before 12 noon. He had been here many times, but lately, he had kind of slipped and had not attended regularly. It seemed like he was always too busy. He still did his prayers five times a day unless he was in the middle of a meeting or something, but it had been very difficult to get away on Fridays, especially since he knew that his boss didn’t really approve of his religious preference.

The al-Aqsa Mosque was an old warehouse on the south side of Chicago that had been converted into a place of worship. About the only thing that distinguished it from the other warehouses in the area was the dome that had been added to the roof.

Dirk entered the mosque and removed his shoes in the foyer. He stepped into the prayer area, making sure he entered with his right foot first. Dirk noticed that the room was already about half full so he

went forward and took a seat on the floor in about the middle of the room. Everyone was facing east toward Mecca as every mosque all over the world was constructed to face toward their most holy site. Soon, the room was filled with men all around him. He sat quietly as he heard the call to prayer given by one of the men in front.

Soon, the Imam got up and started his sermon, or khutbah, as they called it in Arabic. It was the typical sermon extolling the praises of Mohammed and the Koran. Most of the sermon was in English with a few Arabic words thrown in here and there. But then Dirk heard the Imam say, "It is time, my friends; the time is now! Since the caliphate has come to power in the Middle East we have been making plans to take over the world. The world needs Islam, and the only thing standing in our way is the government of the United States of America. Soon, Islam will be the dominant religion in the world, and then there will be total peace when the Mahdi returns to rule the world in peace and tranquility."

Dirk thought to himself, *The Mahdi? What is that?* He had never heard that term used before.

The Imam went on. "Allah has told us through his prophet Mohammed in the Holy Koran that there would come a day when the whole world would be converted to Islam, when every nation on earth will be ruled by Sharia law, the law of Islam. I am here to tell you today, brothers, that that day will be here very soon. Here is what Allah needs you to do. Allah needs you to work for the cause when you are asked to. We have worked long and hard and tirelessly to convert as many of our neighbors as possible to Islam. We will continue to work to convert our neighbors to our religion. But what should we do about those who refuse to convert? My brothers, the time is coming very soon when we can do what the Prophet Mohammed teaches us in the Holy Koran, and that is that when they refuse to convert to Islam peacefully, then it becomes our duty to force them to convert with the sword. You will be called upon soon to take up the sword for Allah,

blessed be his name.”

The room erupted in cheering, clapping, and chanting something in Arabic that Dirk didn’t understand.

Dirk had never seen a room full of men so excited about something before. It was almost like there was an unseen power that was galvanizing the whole room into one cohesive unit.

When the cheering finally stopped, there was another call to prayer. The men all stood shoulder to shoulder in perfectly straight lines as the Imam led them in the Salat prayer. When they were finished, Dirk turned to greet the men on either side of him, shaking their hands and saying, “May Allah accept your prayers.”

He turned and joined in the mass of men heading for the exit when he felt a hand on his shoulder. Dirk turned to find himself staring down into the cold black eyes of Hemdi Abdul. Dirk jumped back a step. “Oh my gosh, I didn’t think they would ever let you out of prison.”

“Hey, good behavior and my great looks went a long way.” Hemdi gave up a rare smile as he reached out to shake Dirk’s hand. “Come with me.”

Dirk didn’t hesitate but followed Hemdi as they mingled with the crowd that was leaving the main prayer room of the mosque.

Once they were in the foyer area, Hemdi directed Dirk to follow him down a corridor. They came to a door that was marked JANITORIAL. Hemdi removed a key from his pocket and opened the door. They went to the back of the room where Hemdi pushed lightly on a shelf unit that was filled with cleaning supplies. The shelf moved easily aside. Obviously it was mounted on rollers of some kind, to reveal an opening that led to a staircase going down to a basement.

“I didn’t know there was a basement in this building!” Dirk exclaimed.

“Very few people know about it,” Hemdi said flatly, “If you ever tell anyone there is a basement in this building we will have to kill you.”

By the cold chill in Hemdi's voice, Dirk had no doubt that he really meant what he said.

The basement was about 50 feet square, dimly lit. Dirk noticed several piles of boxes stacked along the walls that were all covered with tarps. He was about to ask about them but decided not to. He somehow thought he probably knew what was under the tarps and didn't think he needed to give Hemdi another reason to threaten his life.

Hemdi led Dirk to the center of the room where a round table stood. There was one lonely lightbulb hanging from the ceiling directly above the table that gave off some eerie shadows to the rest of the room.

Dirk noticed there was already a man sitting at the table. It was Sam Banskotti. Sam got up and reached out to shake Dirk's hand. "Good to see you again, Dirk. Have a seat. We have something to talk about."

Dirk sat down, and Sam started right in. "As we have discussed before, we have some very important shipments coming into the United States that we need your help with to distribute around the country."

"OK, how can I help?"

"We need six trucks with the drivers I mentioned before in Laredo, Texas, next Tuesday."

"Next Tuesday? That doesn't give me much time. This is Friday already. I don't even know where all those drivers are. They could be in New York or Wisconsin for all I know."

Sam's eyes turned cold as he squinted at Dirk. "Can you do this or not?"

"I'll try my best."

"OK, that's better. We will be faxing you the shipping orders. How do we make sure you get them and nobody else?"

"Tomorrow is Saturday, and I am the only one on duty this weekend, so if you can send them over in the morning I can handle it when no one else is around. Where are we picking the loads up?"

"You will be picking up at the warehouse of the Bluefields Coffee Co."

"I am familiar with the place. We have hauled loads of coffee out of there before."

"Good. So we're all set then. There is just one other thing. You use some kind of GPS truck tracking system to track the location of your trucks, right?"

"Yes, we do."

"We will need the password to get into that system and the codes for the six trucks we will be using."

"Now wait a minute, I could get into some real trouble for giving out that information."

"Don't worry about it. We'll see to it that the information won't get into the wrong hands. Everything will be just fine, and you will be rewarded handsomely for your efforts."

"What do you mean by rewarded handsomely?" Dirk asked.

Sam pulled a bulging envelope from inside his jacket and slid it across the table to Dirk. "Here is ten thousand dollars in cash to give you a little incentive. When the mission is complete, there will be another twenty thousand waiting for you."

"Gee, thanks," Dirk said as he picked up the envelope.

Sam stood and reached across the table to shake Dirk's hand. "There is a phone number inside that envelope. You will need to text the password and the truck codes we talked about to that number before Tuesday."

Dirk stood and shook his hand and said, "Pleasure doing business with you. Oh yeah, one more thing. What did you say we are going to be hauling?"

Sam's face turned stone cold. "We are hauling coffee, just plain old Nicaraguan coffee."

"Right, sure we are, and where are we hauling all this coffee to?"

"You will find that out when you get the shipping orders in the

morning." Sam turned to Hemdi who had been standing in the shadows all along. "Hemdi, get this guy outta here before his questions really start pissin' me off!"

"Sorry," Dirk said. "It's just that sometimes details are good to know."

Dirk turned and followed Hemdi up the stairs and into the storage room. Hemdi opened the storage room door a crack and peered down the hallway, then he swung the door open and said all was clear.

Dirk walked out into the empty hallway. By this time everyone had left and it seemed like he was the only one in the building. As he was passing one of the rooms he could hear voices coming from behind the closed door. He stopped and listened for a moment. He soon realized they were speaking in a foreign language. It sounded like they were all excited about something, but what that something was he couldn't tell since he didn't understand Arabic. Dirk got in his car and headed back to Plainfield.

Chapter 14

Patricia Scott was frustrated. After working hard for the past several days to come up with some clues that could stop the next terrorist attack, she was coming up empty-handed. She had made calls to every intelligence department she could think of, including Israel's Mossad, which was considered to be the best in the world. Even they couldn't give her much information about Abdas Hemati that she didn't already know.

She did learn one thing about Abdas that was new to her, and that was that he had a younger brother Raifa. Patricia listened to her gut instinct and checked the worldwide passport database and discovered that he had gone to Colombia over a year ago and apparently was still there because there was no record of him leaving the country. She decided to talk to her boss about what she had found. She picked up the phone and punched the button for Justin's office.

"Hello," Justin answered.

"This is Patricia. Are you busy? I would like to report what I have found."

"Come on down, and bring Mike with you."

"OK, be right there."

Patricia gathered up the files on her desk and stepped into Mike's office. Mike was sitting with his back turned to her staring at his computer screen. Absentmindedly, his left hand was twirling a pencil above his head, and she could tell by the movement of his jaw that he was chewing gum with a vengeance, as if his life depended on it.

"Boy, look at you go!" Patricia said.

Mike jumped as if he had been poked in the ribs. "Don't ever sneak up on me like that!"

"I wasn't sneaking; I just calmly walked into the room. You were really concentrating. Are you onto something big?"

"I finally got into North Korea's air traffic control system. Of course, I don't know a word of Korean so it didn't mean a thing to me, but I was able to send the data through Google translate and look what I found. Over the past 2 months, there have been 12 flights from Iran to North Korea, and then back to Iran."

"OK, but does that mean anything? I mean, we know they have been getting friendlier. Is there a specific pattern to the flights, or can you identify the type of planes that were used?"

"I think you will be interested to know that the last one that flew, just a few days ago, didn't go back to Iran."

"Where did it go?"

"Venezuela."

"Can you print that out and bring it to Justin's office immediately?"

"Sure thing, I'll be right there."

Patricia entered Justin's office and started briefing him on what she had found.

"Where's Mike?" Justin asked.

"He's printing some information for you; he'll be here in a minute."

"So you are telling me that you are basically coming up empty-handed with this Abdas guy."

"He seems to have disappeared off the face of the earth. I have been in touch with every intelligence agency I can think of. Everybody has a file on Abdas, but nobody seems to know where he is at the present time. The only new information I have is that he has a younger brother named Raifa who is a military guy. The last I could find about him was that he flew to Colombia over a year ago."

"That's interesting. We know that al-Qaida has set up training camps in Colombia and has been getting cozy with the drug cartels. I have a man down there. I'll contact him and see if he knows anything about this guy."

"Here's a picture of him." Patricia handed him a folder. Just then, Mike walked into the room.

"What great information has your demented mind uncovered for us, Mike?" Justin asked. Justin actually highly respected Mike, and Mike knew it. He just liked to tease him about his geekiness.

"Well, yours truly applied his amazing computer skills and expertly hacked into the North Korean air traffic control system. But tell me, sir, just how in the world did you expect me to learn anything from that since I don't know one word of the Korean language?"

"I don't know, but judging by the look of exuberance on your face, I would bet that you figured something out."

Mike grinned as he laid a computer printout on Justin's desk. "Here it is, thanks to my expert skills with Google translate."

"So what does it tell us?"

"It tells us that the Iranians and the North Koreans are up to something. They are sure spending a lot of time together. You will notice the last plane didn't go directly back to Iran. It took a long detour to Venezuela first."

"Venezuela? OK, so what does that tell us? We know that the Iranians and the Venezuelans are getting pretty cozy as well."

"Well, there is something else. I ran the coordinates of their landing point. It was not in a major airport. The landing point was in the northern part of Venezuela, in the jungle. There are no airports registered in that area, so I suspect they landed on a drug runner's airstrip."

"Are you trying to tell me they landed a big jet on a dirt airstrip?"

"Not a big jet, a small jet. I was able to identify the numbers from the plane's flight plan and guess what? That plane belongs to none other than Abdas Hemati!"

Patricia chimed in, "Bingo! Where is that plane now?"

"They were only on the ground for about 30 minutes before they took off again for Iran."

Justin wrinkled his brow. "So apparently they would have had just

enough time to unload something and take off again. Do you suppose they are planning to send nuclear bombs by truck north all the way to the United States?"

"That's not possible," Patricia said. "There's an area between Central and South America that is still impassable by truck. They will have to ship them by boat first into Central America or Mexico or maybe all the way into the United States. That is not unheard of, you know. The drug cartels do it all the time."

Patricia looked at Justin. "Is there any way we can get somebody to that airstrip in Venezuela?"

"Maybe. The CIA does have operatives in that country. I'll make a phone call and see what I can do. Good work you two. I feel like we are gaining, but we are still several steps behind these guys. I hope we're not too late." Justin looked at his watch. "It's Friday. Go home and enjoy your weekend but don't get too far from your cell phone. If I hear anything I may have to call you back in."

Patricia and Mike left Justin's office. Patricia ducked into her office long enough to grab her purse and headed for the door. Mike met her in the hallway. "What's your big rush tonight?"

"My husband and I are going to a concert this evening, and I'm going to have to rush to make it on time."

"Hey, I like concerts. Who's playing and where is it?"

"It's a group called The Solid Rockers. They're playing at our church, and yes, you are welcome to come."

"Solid Rockers? Church? Now, there are some words that don't go together. Sounds boring to me. I think I'll pass. I'll just go home and drink myself into oblivion like I do every weekend."

"Mike, seriously, you should stop that and you know it, and no, this group will be anything but boring. You should come."

"Well, I don't know. Me and churches really don't get along too well, you know. Where is it again?"

Patricia quickly scribbled down the name of the church and the

address and said, "I really need to run. See ya there."

"Don't count on it," Mike yelled after her as she almost ran down the hallway.



Will Scott was just getting ready to leave the office of Scott Trucking when Dirk came in the door. "Well, how were those Friday prayers?" Will asked.

"They were great," Dirk replied.

"I really didn't expect you to be back today."

"I just wanted to check on things, you know, make sure everybody is all set for the weekend."

"OK, don't forget your promise. The concert starts at seven so we'll pick you up at six thirty."

Dirk, who had completely forgotten the concert, got a blank look on his face for a fleeting second but quickly recovered. "Oh, yeah, right, the concert, uh . . . sure, six thirty. Fine. I'll be ready."

"OK, we will see you then. Maybe afterward we can go grab some pizza or something."

"Sure, that would be fine. I better hurry and get my things done here; I don't want to hold you up." Dirk rushed on into his office.

Dirk quickly got behind his computer and logged into their truck-tracker.com. He punched in the codes for the six trucks he needed. The beauty of trucktracker was that he could check on the location of a truck at any time from any computer.

Scott Trucking worked very hard to get their drivers home for the weekend as much as possible. Will believed strongly that letting drivers have some time off with their families was very important to their overall health and performance on the road. While it was not always possible to schedule a driver to be home for a weekend, they succeeded about 80 percent of the time.

Dirk quickly discovered that four of the drivers he was looking

for had come home earlier in the day while the other two were still on the road. He also had the ability to send load orders directly to the in-cab computers that were located in each truck. The latest piece of technology that they had just added recently was a program that determined if the driver wasn't in his truck. The computer gave the driver 10 minutes to respond. If he failed to respond by then, it would send a text message to the driver's cell phone with the load orders. This worked especially great on weekends when the drivers were away from their trucks.

Dirk pulled up a list of empty trailer numbers. He quickly typed a message to the four drivers that were at home. "NEW ORDERS, DEAD-HEAD TO LAREDO, TEXAS, ASAP. PICK UP VERY IMPORTANT LOAD THERE ON TUESDAY MORNING. MORE INSTRUCTIONS WILL FOLLOW." He then picked out a trailer number from the empty trailer list for each driver and sent their numbers to them individually. After that, he turned his attention to the drivers that were still out on the road. The first one was in Denver, Colorado. He picked up the phone and called the driver's cell number.

"Hello, this is Baraka," a heavily accented voice answered.

"Baraka, this is Dirk. There has been a change of plans. Have you been unloaded yet?"

"Yes, I just got load off. Go to truck stop to sleep."

"OK, I know you were supposed to pick up a load tomorrow morning in Denver. I want you to leave that load and deadhead to Laredo, Texas. You need to be there by Tuesday morning."

"What? That no good! No good money drive empty. Me take load tomorrow."

"No, you don't understand. This load is very important."

"Someone else go Texas. Me stay in Colorado. Me haul meat to Chicago."

Dirk was starting to lose patience with this man. "Baraka, listen to me. We will get someone else to pick up that load of meat. I need you

to go to Texas right now. This load is for Allah!”

The phone went silent for a moment. “Are you still there, Baraka? Did you hear what I said?”

For another minute there was silence on the phone. Dirk could only hear the background noise of the truck in the phone. Finally, Baraka came back on in barely a whisper. “Allahu Akbar.” He had used the Arabic term for “Allah is the greatest.”

“Does that mean you are going to go?” Dirk asked.

“Yes, I go Texas now. Where do I take load after I pick up?”

“I’ll send it to your computer tomorrow.”

Dirk hung up the phone and quickly dialed the number for Haveed, the driver of the other truck who was in Tampa, Florida. He got a similar response from Haveed, and he too was soon headed for Texas.

Dirk quickly wrapped things up, grabbed his laptop, and headed out the door. It was already 6 P.M. and he still had to get home and change clothes for the concert.

Chapter 15

Patricia turned to Will in the car and asked, "How did you do it?"
"Do what?" he answered.

"How in the world did you convince Dirk, who is a committed Muslim, to go with us to a Christian concert?"

Will grinned at her and winked. "I just used my amazing charm and persuasive powers. You know how irresistible I am when I turn on the charm."

Patricia laughed. "You are such a country bumpkin. There is not a charming bone in your body."

"Really? So tell me how I landed such a gorgeous beauty queen like you?"

"Hmmmm. Let me see. Must have been the fact that you were filthy rich. Yep, had to be the money."

"I know that's not true. When we met, I didn't have two nickels to rub together. Nope, couldn't have been the money, had to be the charm." They both laughed.

Patricia got serious. "Do you know what it really was? It was your honesty. I knew from the moment we met that I could always count on you. That you would never lie to me or cheat on me, and you know what? I was right, and that is why I still love you now more than ever. So tell me, how did you get Dirk convinced to go with us?"

"He just wanted the day off to go to Friday prayers, and I told him he could go if he promised to go with us to the concert, and he agreed to my terms."

"This is really kind of weird for me. I spend all of my time every day trying to track down terrorists that belong to the Muslim faith and in just a few minutes we are going to have one of them in our car."

"Oh, don't be silly. Dirk is not a terrorist. I grew up with him, knew him since we were kids. He's a very nice guy."

"I know he seems like a nice guy. It's just that I know what that religion can do to nice guys. Remember, I just got shot at by one of them a couple of days ago."

"I know, but Dirk would never do anything like that. He's the best employee I have. Always there on time, always faithful, gets the job done."

They were pulling up to Dirk's apartment. Patricia said, "Well, I just hope the Solid Rockers can instill some truth into his life tonight before it's too late."

Will tapped the horn as they waited for Dirk. Soon he came out of his apartment and walked toward the car.

"He doesn't look too happy," Patricia remarked as she noticed the scowl on Dirk's face.

"He'll be fine. Just try to be nice and make him feel comfortable."

Patricia opened her door and got out. "Hey, Dirk, you can sit in the front. It will be more comfortable for you. This car doesn't have much leg room in the back, and I'm sure you and Will have trucking things to talk about."

Dirk smiled at her. "You don't have to do that, but thanks anyway."

Fifteen minutes later they pulled into the parking lot of Plainview Community Church. The parking lot was already nearly full. Will found a spot as close as he could find, and they started walking toward the building.

Plainview Community Church had recently added a beautiful new sanctuary that seated 1,500 people comfortably, plus there was a balcony in the back that could seat another 500 people for special occasions like this. The front of the building was all reflective glass that as you looked at it from a distance reflected the blue sky, making it hard to see where the top of the huge building stopped and the sky started. In the center of that huge mirrored glass wall was a gigantic cross that

was somehow built with lights behind the glass that kept changing colors. There was every color of the rainbow in that cross, and they would gradually fade from one color to another to create some amazing combinations. With the mirrored glass all around it, the cross gave the illusion that it was just hanging in the sky, especially at night. Will's favorite color scheme was when the cross turned a rustic brown with red lights pinpointing spots at each end of the cross beam and at the place where Jesus' feet would have been.

Dirk was looking at the cross as they walked toward the building. "Wow, that's quite a piece of architecture. It must have cost a small fortune to build that cross."

Will said, "Yes, I'm sure it did although nobody knows just how much. There is a story behind that. There is a wealthy man in our church who designed and paid for that cross when we built the church. He said it was his way of giving something back for what the cross had done for him."

"What do you mean by that? The cross is just some pieces of wood nailed together."

"Oh, but it is so much more than that. You see, the cross represents the person who was crucified on it, Jesus Christ. He died to take the penalty for our sins so we don't have to."

"Ha! Jesus, a man who lived thousands of years ago, and you really believe all this garbage about him being crucified and all of that? Well, let me tell you something. I believe that Jesus taught a lot of good things, but he didn't die on a cross. The Koran teaches us that Allah saved him from those people that were trying to kill him. Let's get one thing straight. I came with you tonight because you promised me there would be some good music, not to hear some lies about some Jesus guy who lived thousands of years ago."

Will recognized that he had gone far enough. "OK, OK, just cool your jets; let's go hear some good music."

The three of them walked into the building where they were

greeted by some friendly people at the door. The church had a huge foyer area and people were milling around everywhere. Many of them came up and greeted Will and Patricia who always introduced Dirk to their friends. Will pointed out that Dirk was a good friend and one of his best employees.

Dirk said, "Man, you two seem to be pretty popular in this place. Do you know everybody here?"

Patricia spoke up. "Well, probably not everybody, but we know most of the regular attenders. Most of the time we are the ones standing at the door greeting people as they come in so we get to know a lot of people."

Just then from behind them they heard the squeal of a woman's voice. "Will and Patricia, wait up!"

They all three turned around to see this petite little blonde coming running toward them as fast as her high heels would allow.

"Oh my gosh, it's Megyn Rogers!" Patricia exclaimed as the little blonde came up and gave her a big hug. "I didn't know you were back in town."

"Oh yes, I just moved back," Megyn said as she turned and gave Will a big hug.

Megyn had been a special friend of theirs for years. She had had a very difficult childhood, and Patricia helped her work through some of her problems and was very instrumental in getting her on the right track. Patricia had encouraged her to go to school and get her nursing degree because she recognized something special in Megyn; it was her love for people.

For the past 3 years, Megyn had been working at a mission clinic in South America.

"We have got a lot of catching up to do!" Patricia told Megyn as she gave her another big hug. "Please come sit with us!"

"Oh, I would love to!" Megyn squealed.

Just then, Patricia thought about Dirk and turned to see he was

standing off to the side by himself. "Oh, I am so sorry," she gushed. "Megyn, let me introduce you to a friend. This is Dirk Pierson. He works for Scott Trucking. Dirk, this is Megyn Rogers, an old friend who I haven't seen for 3 years."

Megyn reached out her hand and looked up and gave Dirk a huge smile. "Nice to meet you, Dirk."

Dirk felt his heartbeat increase noticeably. This had to be the most beautiful creature he had ever seen. Barely five feet tall, she couldn't weigh more than a hundred pounds with blond hair that hung gracefully down to her shoulders and the biggest brown eyes that just had the look of total innocence about them. She had a beautiful natural-looking tan from being in the tropics of South America for 3 years. When she flashed that huge smile to reveal a set of perfect white teeth he totally lost his voice. Dirk took her hand and opened his mouth to say something, but when nothing came out, he just nodded his head.

Will said, "Come on, guys, we better get in there. The concert is about to start."

The Solid Rockers were a group of five guys who had come from a variety of backgrounds. Throughout the evening they all somehow were able to work their testimony into the program. The drummer was a former alcoholic, the bass player had been a drug addict, the guy playing the keyboard had grown up in church but joined a rock'n' roll band as a teenager. The guy on the electric guitar told about his involvement in the gangs on the south side of Chicago, but it was the lead singer, Richard Young's, testimony that Dirk most identified with.

"I was young and foolish," Richard started as he sat on a stool and slowly picked on his guitar. "I thought I was 10 feet tall and bullet-proof. I could do anything I set my mind to. I lived the party life, alcohol, drugs, and women, but there was always a hole inside that was never satisfied, so I just tried to fill it with more of what I knew best—alcohol, drugs, and women. Finally, I came to the place where most addicts come to—I ran out of money. So, what was I to do? I tried to

get a job, but no one would hire me because I had lost the last six jobs I had because of drugs. So I did what I thought was my only other option: I borrowed a gun from a buddy and robbed a convenience store.”

Richard strummed his guitar while he paused a minute for effect, then he continued. “You know those pesky security cameras do actually work. Yep, caught me red-handed. The judge sent me to prison for 5 years.” He smiled and played the beginning of Johnny Cash’s “Folsom Prison Blues.”

“This may sound strange, but getting sent to prison was the best thing that ever happened to me. You see, it was there, in prison, that I found Jesus. It was there, in prison, that a man came into my cell block one day and handed me a Bible. I had never had a Bible before, and since there wasn’t anything else to do in prison, I read it from cover to cover. It was there, in my prison cell, that I learned what freedom really is. I learned that even though there were bars around me locking me into that prison cell, I could be free on the inside.

“The Bible says in John 8:36 that if the Son shall make you free, you shall be free indeed. It was there, in that prison cell, that I knelt and I accepted the Son, Jesus Christ, as my Savior, and for the first time in my life, that empty hole in my heart was filled. I became a new person. Where there used to be hate, now there is only love. Where there used to be misery and pain, now there is a joy that is hard to explain. God has done some amazing things with my life. I have to pinch myself sometimes to see if this is really real or am I just dreaming. Believe me, it’s real. In fact, it’s so real I wrote a song about it.”

Richard started singing softly the song he had written about his life. The song started out about the emptiness, the pain and suffering of alcohol and drugs. The tempo and momentum of the song kept building until it exploded into the chorus about how Jesus changed a life that was broken and made it brand-new. Every time the band came to the chorus, the crowd cheered. By the end of the song, everyone was on their feet cheering like nothing Dirk had ever experienced before.

The sound was deafening as the band played an amazing crescendo of praise to God, and the people cheered so loud Dirk thought the roof would surely raise right off of the building. He was getting uncomfortable. There was something these people had that he just couldn't quite understand. They seemed so happy and excited about life. Could they be so deceived that they didn't realize they believed in something that didn't even exist?

Richard was wrapping up the concert. He asked anyone who wanted to accept Jesus to come down front to the altar for prayer. Dirk watched as 40 or 50 people made their way to the front of the church. He wasn't sure why, but this made him very uncomfortable. He wanted so bad to get up and run out the door, but he didn't want to make a scene so he just stayed in his seat and tried to ignore the feelings in his heart.

Patricia noticed Dirk fidgeting in his seat and looked over at him and saw that his face had broken out in sweat. She reached over and touched his hand and whispered, "I'll go with you to the altar if you want me to."

Dirk looked at her with eyes full of fear as if he had just seen a ghost. "No," he said. "I'm fine. I'm not going down there."

"Are you sure? I think God is speaking to you."

"No! Just leave me alone!" With that, he got up and literally ran out the door.

Patricia turned to Will and whispered, "Wow, did you see that? I think the Holy Spirit is really getting to him. Should we go after him?"

"No, I don't think so. We'll catch up with him at the car in a few minutes. I think we just need to let him be alone for a bit."

Richard was finishing up with the invitation and soon everyone was dismissed. Will, Patricia, and Megyn made their way to the exit. Will noticed that the mood had changed in the room. It was quieter and more subdued, almost reverent. People were talking but more in hushed tones as they quietly exited the building in respect for those

down front who were still praying.

Patricia turned to Megyn. "We're going to stop at Uncle Joe's for some pizza. Why don't you join us? We have some serious catching up to do."

"I would love to. I'll meet you there."

By now, they were entering the parking lot and walking toward their car. Megyn had parked on the other side of the lot so she split off and headed toward her car.

When they reached their vehicle, Dirk was leaning against the side of the car with an angry look on his face. Will hit the unlock button on his keychain, and Dirk quickly got into the backseat.

Will and Patricia got in the car and as Will started the vehicle he looked at Dirk in the mirror. "Are you OK?" he asked.

"I'm fine, just take me home."

"We're going to meet Megyn at Uncle Joe's Pizza place. You're welcome to go with us."

"No, I'm really tired. Please just drop me off at my apartment first, then you Holy Rollers can go and have your little pow-wow."

"OK, whatever you say." Will gave a knowing glance to Patricia, who winked back at him. They dropped Dirk off at his apartment and headed over to Uncle Joe's.

Chapter 16

Raifa Hemati was getting bored as Rahan Najafi drove the big rig north. They had driven as hard as they dared to without bringing any extra attention to themselves. Twice they had been stopped by police officers in Nicaragua. The first time, Raifa was ready to jump for the stash of automatic weapons hidden under the bunk, but Rahan said, "Just calm down. All these guys want is a little extra spending money. I'll take care of them."

Rahan talked to the officers who were accusing him of wrong lane usage, which was ridiculous because in Nicaragua, it was hard to tell where the lanes were since most of them weren't marked, and if they were marked for two lanes, it wasn't unusual for drivers to turn them into three or four lanes. Rahan always carried a lot of extra cash just for this purpose so he slipped the guy a thousand córdobas and everyone was happy.

The border crossings were not a problem since the Bluefields Coffee Co. trucks made frequent trips up this corridor to the United States. They had passed without incident through Honduras and Guatemala into Mexico.

Getting around Mexico City was slow going as usual with all the traffic and poorly maintained roads. Finally, they were headed north into the countryside. Rahan broke the silence. "We are now entering no man's land. You can expect just about anything from here to the U.S. border. This area is mostly controlled by the drug cartels, so if they want you to get through you will, and if they don't, you won't."

"Please tell me you have a deal with these guys to not bother your trucks," Raifa said.

"Well, yes, up to a certain point. The cartel that I work with gives

us protection for a fee. But you never know when you will come across some idiot who is out to prove something. In fact, there has been an SUV following us for the last 30 minutes, and I don't like it. I'm going to pull over up here and see what they do."

They came around a bend, and Rahan saw a place where there was a wide shoulder where he could pull the big rig off the side of the road. He crawled down out of the truck and acted like he was checking his tires.

The white SUV slowed but kept on going. Rahan saw that there were at least four men in the SUV and that they were checking them over pretty closely as they went by. He walked around the truck and checked the rest of the tires, then crawled back into the cab and pulled back out onto the road.

"Well, I guess they were just checking us out. They must have decided we weren't worth the hassle."

"Did you recognize any of them?" Raifa asked.

"No, but I did recognize the tattoo of a spider on one guy's arm. That tells me they are part of the Sinaloa cartel. We work with them some through the Federation, but I still wouldn't trust them."

The Federation was a consortium of the seven major cartels operating in Mexico. It was set up with representatives from each cartel and was designed to help one another by providing intelligence resources and protection. The Federation seemed to work pretty well as long as each group minded their own business and stayed in their own territories, but occasionally, some young buck would try to push the line and people would get killed.

The Bluefields Coffee Co. truck was now entering a remote area of dense forest and mountainous roads. The roads twisted and turned around the mountains making for slow progress. Rahan expertly handled the big rig as they navigated one slope after another. He kept shifting down as they made their way up a steep slope until they were just crawling with the big diesel engine howling in protest. On the

right side of the truck was a sheer cliff going straight up, and on the left side of the road was a 300 foot drop-off into a ravine. Rahan saw the caution sign that showed a sharp turn to the right at the top of the hill with the suggested speed of 15 km/hr. underneath it.

Rahan commented, "Fifteen km/hr. Like I could go any faster than that if I wanted to! These roads sure weren't made for trucks." He swung the truck as wide as he could around the hairpin curve and saw that the road flattened out a bit, and there, in the middle of the road, totally blocking their path, was the white SUV that had passed them a short while before. Two men were standing beside the vehicle with AK-47s trained on their chests. There was nowhere to go. Reversing down the steep, winding slope they had just come up was totally out of the question. The right side was blocked by a steep cliff, and their left side was a drop-off into the abyss.

Rahan brought the truck to a halt just a few feet from the SUV.

The men with the guns started yelling, "Get your hands up where we can see them and slowly get out of the truck."

Rahan set the air brakes on the truck and raised his hands. Raifa said in Farsi, "Weren't there four men in that truck?"

Rahan said, "Yes, and I'm sure they have a gun trained on your head from somewhere."

Just then, the other two men appeared. One from the right side stepped out from behind a small bush where he had been hiding; the other one climbed up onto the roadway from the left side where he had been standing on a small ridge. The men had automatic pistols trained on Rahan and Raifa as they slowly made their way out of the truck. They ordered Rahan and Raifa to walk around to the front of the truck where the other two men were waiting for them.

The man with the spider tattoo seemed to be the spokesman for the rebels. "What are you hauling in the truck?" he asked.

"No española," Raifa said.

"OK, English then. Do you do English?"

"Yes, we are Americans that moved to Nicaragua."

Rahan glared at Raifa, wondering what he was up to, what his game plan was, but decided whatever it was, he would be best suited to play along.

Mr. Spider Tattoo raised his weapon and trained it on Rahan's heart and said in perfect English, "OK, one more time. What's in the truck?"

"Coffee, lots and lots of coffee. The best coffee money can buy," Rahan answered.

"That's not what we heard. Some little bird told me you are hauling something very important in there."

Raifa muttered in Farsi to Rahan, "I knew it! I knew we should have eliminated your guys in the warehouse. You thought you could trust your men. I am here to tell you that in this business you can't trust anybody. When we get out of this mess, I am going to beat your ass so bad you will wish you were dead."

Mr. Spider Tattoo yelled, "Stop talking that garbage, whatever it is. If you want to speak, then speak in Spanish or English so we can understand you. Now, what's in that trailer?"

Raifa yelled back at him. "You heard the man. It's a load of coffee heading to Texas. You know how those Americans love their coffee."

"What if I don't believe you?"

"Well, go have a look for yourself."

"I think I will. Keep these two covered," he said to the two guys with the pistols in the backs of Rahan and Raifa, then he motioned for his partner to follow him and they walked toward the back of the truck.

Raifa said to Rahan in Farsi, "Remember your training. As soon as those two clear the back of the truck, let's move."

The guards were making a typical mistake of the inexperienced. They were too close to the men they were guarding. Their method may work for most common thugs they met up with in Mexico, but these were highly trained Iranian operatives, and disarming these men

was like taking candy from a baby. As soon as they saw the two self-appointed truck inspectors clear the back of the trailer, Raifa and Rahan made their move. They spun around and grabbed the gun-carrying arms of their assailants and with a quick twist, heard those arms snap as their assailants crashed to the ground. The Mexicans didn't even have time to pull the triggers on their guns. They opened their mouths to cry out but found a hand over their mouths and felt the pressure of another hand at the back of their heads. A quick snap and their necks were broken.

Raifa and Rahan quickly retrieved the pistols that their assailants' lifeless hands had dropped, thankful that the rumble of the idling truck engine covered any noise they had made.

The two men who had gone to the rear of the truck quickly discovered the lock on the trailer and cursed as they came back around the side of the truck. "Hey, I need the key . . ." Mr. Spider Man yelled as he came around the side of the truck, then his head exploded as Raifa took him out with a dead-on shot from the front of the truck. The other man met the same fate as he started down the other side when his head met a bullet from Rahan's gun.

The two men quickly dragged the bodies to the side of the road and rolled them off the cliff. Raifa went to the SUV and discovered the keys were still in the ignition. He started the motor, put the transmission in gear, and jumped out just before the vehicle disappeared over the cliff.

Rahan had already started the big rig moving as Raifa climbed back into the cab.

Raifa glared at Rahan. "So much for flying under the radar. I wonder who else knows about this load."

"Hey, I'm sorry, OK, but you don't know if it was one of my guys or not. Quite frankly, I can't believe any of them would double-cross me like that."

"Like I said, in this business you can't trust anybody. Look at you.

Even your wife thinks you are just a coffee farmer. Man, is she ever going to have a rude awakening one of these days.” Raifa laughed partly from the humor of it all and partly because of his frazzled nerves from what they had just experienced. Rahan gave him a stern look as he shifted the big rig into tenth gear, but then he just couldn’t help himself as Raifa’s laughter became contagious. The two terrorists barreled down the highway giggling uncontrollably like a couple of teenage schoolgirls.

Chapter 17

Dirk Pierson tossed and turned in bed once again. It seemed like he hadn't slept for days. He wasn't sure whether his problem had something to do with the fact that he was going behind his boss's back by sending those six trucks to Texas or the fact that his mind kept going back to the concert of last Friday night:

Will had only briefly questioned why Dirk would ask six trucks to deadhead all the way to Texas to pick up loads of coffee. Dirk was able to show him the shipping orders and the fact that they were all stamped as urgent to convince him that it was alright. Dirk also convinced him that he had negotiated a shipping rate that was about twice the amount they would normally receive for these loads.

When Will questioned Dirk about the urgency behind these loads he quickly came up with a believable story about the shipments being held up in customs for a while and Starbucks was about to run out of coffee. "And you know how we Americans are; we run on coffee. The whole country could shut down if we don't get our caffeine fix every morning," Dirk had told him. Will seemed convinced and never asked any more questions about the shipments.

Dirk looked at the red numbers on his alarm clock. Two A.M. Why couldn't he sleep? This was the day the drivers were supposed to pick up their loads. In a few days when those loads were delivered he would be a much richer man.

Dirk wondered what was in those loads that made them so important. Drugs? Maybe, but he doubted it. He guessed it was probably some kind of bomb-making material that had been smuggled across the Mexican border.

There was something else bothering him as well although he

couldn't admit it even to himself. Every time he closed his eyes, all he could see were scenes from last Friday's concert. He could hear the music and the lyrics to the songs as if he had been singing them for years. He could also hear almost word for word the testimony that the lead singer had given that night. Dirk realized that Richard's testimony was in many ways very similar to his own. They had both gotten involved in alcoholism and drug abuse and wound up in prison. But that's where their similarities stopped. Richard had come out of prison a Christian. Dirk had come out of prison a Muslim. For the first time in Dirk's life, he wondered if he had made the right choice. Those Christians all seemed so nice and loving. They weren't at all what his Islamic friends had made them out to be.

Dirk finally gave up on sleep and got out of bed. He went to his bedroom closet and rummaged through a stack of books until he found the book he was looking for. A Bible that Will had given him years ago.

Dirk had taken the Bible out of respect for Will, but when he came home, he threw it into the corner of his closet and forgot about it until now. He picked up the Bible and went back and sat on his bed where he opened it up and flipped through the pages. His mind was racing; his heart was pounding and his palms were sweaty. Over and over again he had been taught by the sermons he heard from the Imams at the mosque that the Bible was full of lies. He had heard them teach that all Bibles should be burned. He had heard them preach that Jesus was just a good man, but that he didn't really die on the cross like the Christians believed.

But then, Dirk thought again about Richard's testimony, about how he had turned to Jesus and that Jesus had dramatically changed his life. Dirk came to the realization that they couldn't both be right. One had to be true and the other had to be false, or maybe they were both false and there really wasn't a god at all. Maybe the atheists were right after all, and we all just kind of came into being from nothing.

Dirk somehow knew that wasn't true. He knew there had to be

a higher power of some kind that created everything in the universe. Dirk realized that the belief in the God of creation was the one thing that Christians and Muslims agreed on. In fact, they shared belief in a lot of things from the beginning up until the time of Abraham. That is where the two religions veered off in different directions. Abraham had two sons, Isaac and Ishmael. Christianity believed that the promises and blessings of God were passed down through Isaac, Jacob, and the Jewish people.

Mohammed was a direct descendant of Ishmael, and the Muslims believed that he was the only true prophet of God.

Dirk had never read the Bible before. He flipped it open, and somehow it opened to the book of John. He started reading, "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God."

"This doesn't make much sense," he said to himself, but he kept reading. Dirk read chapter one, then chapter two, and on and on through the night. He became so engrossed in the words of the book that he was startled when his alarm went off. Six A.M.

Chapter 18

The Bluefields coffee truck sat patiently in line with a hundred other vehicles at the United States border crossing. Raifa was getting nervous. "Do you really think we can pull this off? Don't they have radiation detectors?"

"Oh yes, they have radiation detectors, drug-sniffing dogs and some of the meanest, most skeptical guards you have ever seen. If the North Koreans did their job right, they were supposed to have tested the bombs with radiation detectors before they sent them to us," Rahan said. "Keep your cool. We are just some truckers doing our job delivering coffee."

Finally after an hour of waiting in the hot sun it was their turn. A burly border patrol agent motioned them to stop. "Get out of the truck and bring your papers," he barked.

They got down and handed him their papers as another agent with a drug-sniffing dog made a circle around the truck.

Mr. Burly Border Patrol Agent frowned as he looked at their passports. "Where are you headed?" he asked.

"Laredo, Texas," Rahan answered.

"What is the purpose of your trip?"

"We have a very important mission to keep America running on its favorite drug, coffee. If we don't get this load delivered on time, the whole U.S. economy may come to a screeching halt," Rahan chuckled.

"Don't get smart with me," Mr. Burly said without cracking a smile.

Rahan looked at Raifa and rolled his eyes.

The agent with the drug-sniffing dog yelled from the back of the truck, "Bring your key back here and unlock this door so we can

inspect your cargo.”

Rahan and Raifa walked to the back of the truck. “Man, do you know how hot it is in these things on a day like this?” Rahan asked. “I’m sure glad it’s you and not me that has to go in there.” He unlocked the door and swung it wide open, letting out a blast of superheated air. “Go ahead and crawl in there if you like.”

The agent climbed up into the truck and looked at the pallets of coffee that all appeared to be the same. When he was satisfied, he jumped down and said, “OK, you can lock it up again.”

Mr. Burly Patrol Agent then instructed the men to get back into the truck and proceed slowly through the radiation detectors. “Watch the red light in front of you. When it turns green, you will be free to go,” he said.

Raifa tried to appear calm but was already planning in his mind how to quickly grab the weapons that were stashed under the bunk if anything went wrong. He wasn’t about to go down without a fight if they were detected. The truck slowly inched its way through the radiation detectors. Both men were on edge, hearts pounding, expecting to hear some alarm go off at any time. Although it took less than a minute, it seemed like an eternity before the truck had cleared the radiation detectors.

Was the light going to change or not? They were now completely clear of the detectors and still the light hadn’t changed. Raifa started to reach for the bunk. “Something is not right. We are going to have to fight this out.”

Rahan reached over and grabbed his arm. “Hold it. Give them a few more seconds. Ha! There, the light just turned green.” He slowly increased speed as they both sighed with relief.



Six Scott Trucking Co. trucks pulled into the Jiffytown truck stop just outside of Laredo, Texas, at different times throughout the

night on Monday. At 5 A.M., the drivers all congregated at the truck of Baraka for a little meeting.

Baraka opened the back door on his trailer which was backed up against the tree-lined border of the huge truck stop parking lot. He greeted each one of the drivers as they came up to the trailer with the traditional Middle Eastern hug and cheek to cheek kiss. All the men went inside and took up positions sitting cross-legged on the floor of the trailer.

These six young men had grown up together in Iraq. Baraka and his brothers Jamal and Mohamed, Haveed and his brother Ishmael, and their friend Yasin.

Their parents had been devout Muslims who wanted their boys to have the best education so they sent them to the local Muslim school where they learned the basics of how to read and write, but they also learned something else. Every day in their school they were taught the Koran until they could recite it from cover to cover, word for word. They were taught that there was no God but Allah and that his desire is to rule the world and someday he would. Their young impressionable minds were taught that anybody who wasn't a follower of Allah is an infidel and when the time is right Allah would rain judgment down on them and destroy them. They were led to believe that the highest calling any Muslim could have was to die as a martyr for Allah while waging jihad, or holy war, on the infidels.

These men had grown up with a severe hatred for Jews and Christians because of what they had been taught by the mullahs in school. When the Americans invaded Baghdad in 2002, one of the bombs hit the apartment building where they lived. The Americans had targeted the building because the insurgents were firing anti-aircraft missiles from the roof. That fateful night, these six teenagers had been out in the streets and that is what saved them. Their parents weren't so lucky. When the boys came home, they found their apartment building in a pile of rubble and they all became orphans.

That incident cemented it for them. They joined the insurgency and started their training. Now it was more than just jihad; they all had a deep hatred for the Americans and an unshakable desire for revenge. They had individually made their way to America and learned quickly to use the American system of tolerance against itself. They found it was very easy to enlist in driver's training school and eventually get hired at Scott Trucking. The last 2 years had just been a waiting game. Waiting for just the right time, the right set of circumstances. They had often been tempted to take things into their own hands; they could see how they could do a lot of damage with the big rigs they drove every day, especially when they were hauling hazardous materials. Their handler continually had to remind them that they needed to be patient because they had a special purpose and when the time was finally right, it would be bigger than anything the world had ever seen and their names would be remembered in the history books forever.

Baraka addressed the group. "Allah has brought us to this place for this special purpose. We have waited a long time for this day. Soon, we will have our revenge on the Americans that killed our families."

"Allahu Akbar," the men in the trailer shouted.

They all started talking excitedly about soon being in heaven with 72 virgins at their beck and call. The more they talked, the more excited and louder they got. Finally Baraka spoke up.

"OK, that's enough. We need to talk business. Do you all have your pickup times and delivery points?"

They all compared their pickup times which were spaced 1 hour apart. Haveed said, "My brothers, this is a sad day and a happy day. We will not be seeing each other again in this life, but in the life that is to come, I hope to see all of you."

"Allahu Akbar," they all replied in unison.

"We must pray," Baraka said.

The men unrolled the little carpets they had brought with them and knelt on them facing east toward Mecca. They chanted some

words in Arabic and bowed their faces to the ground, then back up and down several times. When they had completed their prayers, they raised their voices in unison, "Allahu Akbar!" Just then, Haveed noticed a shadow at the back of the truck where the door was slightly ajar letting some light into the trailer.

"Someone has been listening to us," Haveed whispered.

The men quietly made their way to the back of the trailer. Baraka took the last step to the end of the trailer, and with one fluid motion, pushed the door open and jumped to the ground, startling a man who was standing there with his ear to the side of the trailer.

The man looked like a typical Texas truck driver: blue jeans, a plaid flannel shirt, cowboy boots and a cowboy hat. Baraka grabbed a fistful of his shirt collar while he slammed the man up against the trailer and said between clenched teeth, "What are you doing here?"

"Hey, take it easy," the cowboy said, his eyes widening as he saw the other five men coming out of the truck and encircling him. "I was just coming back to my truck from breakfast and heard something going on over here so I just came over to check it out."

"What did you hear?" Baraka questioned.

"I heard everything! I don't know what your diaper heads are up to, but I know it's not good. I'm fed up with you people. You and your Allah can all just go to hell as far as I'm concerned."

Baraka hit the man in the stomach and knocked the wind out of him. His knees started to buckle but Haveed and Yasin grabbed his arms and held him upright. Baraka vented his anger with an uppercut to the chin that violently snapped his head back against the truck. "Let me tell you something," he said angrily, "it was your people, Americans, that killed my parents in Iraq. Allah wants justice and revenge, and the time has come—the time is now!"

Baraka said to Haveed and Yasin, "Take him out into those trees behind the trucks and do what you know is best. We can't afford to have this cowboy flappin' his jaws about what he just heard."

Suddenly the cowboy realized what was about to happen. "Hey, I won't say anything, I promise!" he exclaimed. "Please don't kill me. I have a wife and a little boy. Please, I promise to keep my mouth shut about what I heard."

Haveed said, "Do you really think we are that stupid? As soon as we turn you loose, you'll be shouting it from the rooftops."

Yasin and Haveed dragged the unwilling truck driver into the trees. When they entered a secluded area of brush, Yasin pulled a knife from a hidden sheath that he always carried under his shirt and with one quick movement, slit the cowboy's throat from ear to ear.

Chapter 19

Patricia checked in through security on Tuesday morning and headed to her office. Justin met her in the hallway and called her into his office. “Remember a few days ago when Mike tracked that Iranian jet to an airstrip in the jungle of northern Venezuela?”

“Yes, I sure do. We’re suspicious Abdas Hemati was on that plane although we really don’t have any concrete proof.”

“No, we don’t have any proof, however, it is the jet that he is known to fly on.” Justin reached for a file on his desk and handed it to Patricia.

“The CIA just sent these to me. Their operative in Venezuela went to that airstrip to check it out. Here are some photos he took.”

Patricia opened the file. The first picture was a gruesome sight – four bloated, decomposing bodies lying in the forest that looked like they had been there for a few days.

“Executed gangland style. Looks like whoever did this had automatic weapons. These bodies were riddled with bullets.”

Patricia flipped to the next picture, a river with what appeared to be a makeshift boat dock.

“This river runs parallel to the airstrip. There is a well-worn path through the jungle down to this little dock. I’m guessing this is a common place for the drug smugglers to load their drugs onto boats for shipment to the United States.”

Patricia felt a chill go through her body. “So let’s think this through a little bit. We believe the Iranians bought or bargained nuclear weapons from the North Koreans. Abdas loaded those weapons into his private jet and flew them to this remote airstrip in Venezuela where they were loaded onto some kind of boat to be shipped to the United States. He would have had to have some help to load those bombs onto

the boat, but he was not going to take a chance that one of those guys would talk so he killed them. We have to find Abdas now! Do we have any recent intel on his whereabouts?"

"Absolutely nothing. I have all the agencies looking for him, even Israel's Mossad, the best intelligence agency in the world. Usually if anyone can find someone they can. He seems to have totally disappeared. Even the phone taps aren't picking up anything at all."

"OK, let's think of another angle. What kind of boat would they use for an operation like this?"

Justin said, "Well, we know that Muslim extremists have been working with the drug cartels in Mexico for a while now. We can see that from all the beheadings going on down there. They use a variety of boats to smuggle their drugs north."

"I know all about that," Patricia said, "but this is the most expensive shipment they have ever had. They are not going to take a chance that some coast guard plane spots them out in open water. They are going to use the surest way they possibly can to make sure that shipment gets here."

"OK, I'm following you. Got any ideas?"

"A submarine."

"What? A submarine?"

"Yes, a submarine. I just read an article the other day on the Internet that said how they found a place in Colombia that was making submarines for the drug trade."

"Great! So now we have a submarine loaded with nuclear bombs steaming for the United States. How in the world are we supposed to find a submarine?"

"You won't need to. Look at the timeline. That plane landed last week. My guess is those bombs are already here. You better call the president."

"Call the president with what? We have no concrete evidence of any of this stuff. It's all just pure speculation."

"I know that, but there are too many things that are lining up here, and I just have this feeling about this thing."

"There you go with those feelings again. Let me remind you that good intelligence doesn't run on feelings, it runs on facts. Now, we need some facts, and we need them quick. Let's assume your submarine theory is true. Where would they head to? Where would be the best place to unload cargo like that?"

Patricia thought for a moment. "Somewhere in Central America."

"Central America? Why not just steam right up to the United States?"

"Too risky. The coast guard does a pretty good job patrolling our shores, and they are even using sonar now to detect these submarines, but our southern border is wide open. Thanks to the North American Free Trade Agreement better known as NAFTA there are thousands of trucks that pass through our southern border every day. It would be a very simple thing to hide those bombs in a truck and smuggle them across the border. My best guess is those bombs were loaded into trucks and are now heading to a city near you."

"Don't we have radiation detectors at the border crossings that would detect them?" Justin asked, still unconvinced about the theory.

"Remember the bomb in Nevada? It was in a welded stainless steel case. If that's their model, then no radiation could leak out of the bomb, and I'm sure they have their own radiation detectors so they could test them before shipment."

"OK, that's an interesting theory, and you may be right, but I need some facts, and I need them fast. I'll alert every border crossing to be more vigilant than ever. Meanwhile, you and Mike use every piece of technology you have available to you and get me some facts. You're dismissed."

Patricia stuck her head into Mike Pence's office. "Hey, you busy?" she said.

Mike was sitting there twirling a pencil in his left hand as he deftly

controlled the computer mouse with his right hand. "Of course I'm always busy; after all, we have terrorists to catch. The security of our great nation rests on my broad shoulders. But never mind that, what can I do for Your Highness?"

"Oh, stop it! Can you access the database of all the trucks crossing our southern border in the last 3 days?"

"Of course I can. There is absolutely nothing impossible when the royal highness asks for it. So when I access this huge database of information, exactly what would the princess be seeking?"

"You are such a dork. To tell you the truth, I'm not sure what we are looking for. Just anything unusual, I guess. I suspect those bombs were shipped across our southern border in a truck."

As Patricia filled him in on her conversation with Justin and turned to leave the room, Mike said, "I'll get right on it, and oh, by the way, that was a great concert the other night."

"You were there? I didn't see you! Where were you sitting?"

"I was in the balcony behind you. I thought about yelling at you but decided it might not be appropriate. Especially since you were sitting with two other men who, I assume, one of them was your husband. And I thought if I yelled at you, then people would think you were seeing three men and that just wouldn't be cool, so I just sat in silence by my lonesome self."

"Aw, poor baby. But, I'm glad you were there. You should have found us afterward."

"Yeah, I guess so. Well, I had better get to work tracking down these terrorists for you."

Chapter 20

Rahan and Raifa waited impatiently in the warehouse of the Bluefields Coffee Co. After crossing the border into the United States they had smooth sailing into Laredo, Texas.

The warehouse was a large block structure in an industrial park on the edge of town that looked like every other building in the park. Rahan had been leasing this building for 2 years for his growing coffee business and occasional shipments of drugs. No one in the area suspected that it was a cover for the biggest terrorist attack in American history.

There were two men who operated the warehouse. Both were men he had trained with in Iran, specialists in terrorism.

At 7 A.M., the first of the Scott Trucking trucks backed into the dock, right on time. They had scheduled the trucks at 1-hour intervals so that they would not draw any undue attention.

The first truck driver was Baraka. He set the air brakes on his truck and went inside the warehouse. Raifa and Rahan greeted him with a hug and a Middle Eastern double-cheek kiss.

"Welcome to Texas," Rahan said. "Praise be to Allah, your destiny is about to be fulfilled. We are very proud of you for what you are doing. I can assure you that your family in Iraq will be well taken care of. Come into the office and we will get the paperwork for your load."

Raifa instructed the forklift driver how to load the truck. "Put twenty pallets of coffee on the truck, but place one of those special pallets right in the center."

Meanwhile, Rahan was printing out the paperwork for Baraka. "Your load is going to New York City. This address is downtown Manhattan. If you put this address into your GPS and set it for 'truck

route,' it will direct you to this spot. Now, it is very important that you be there at exactly 10 A.M. on Thursday morning. Your progress will be tracked by satellite, and when you reach your destination, the device you are carrying will be remotely detonated."

Baraka nodded indicating that he understood what he was getting ready to do.

"Do you have any questions?" Rahan asked.

"Yes. What if I get in a traffic jam and don't make it on time? After all, we are talking about New York City here."

"That is why we have access to the GPS position of your truck. The man who will be triggering the bombs can decide if he wants to go ahead and do it or wait until you are in position."

"So what you are saying is I won't know exactly when that thing is going to go off."

"That's right. Just don't try anything stupid. Remember, he can set it off at any time. Your job is to get it into the best possible position to do the most damage. Immediately after those bombs go off, we have people in position to take over the country from the inside."

"Wow, I feel honored to be a part of something so great. Finally the Great Satan will be destroyed. Praise be to Allah," Baraka said with a big grin on his face.

"One other thing, give me your cell phone. You are to have no communication with anyone on this trip. Drive very carefully; always stay within the speed limits. Your truck is not overweight so you don't have to worry about that at all. Do not draw any attention to yourself. If you do get stopped for any reason, your paperwork should all be in order so you shouldn't have any problems."

Baraka handed his cell phone to Rahan, who put it on the floor and smashed it with a hammer. "Some of these things have traceable GPS chips in them. We don't want anyone tracking it here or anywhere else. Your truck should be loaded, and you have a long drive ahead of you. May Allah be with you."

“Thank you for the opportunity to serve Allah,” Baraka said as he took his paperwork and headed for his truck.

Baraka fired up the big Detroit diesel engine and headed north on I-35. No sooner had he left then he met Haveed coming in for the second load.

The process in the Laredo warehouse was repeated five more times with each driver’s trailer getting loaded with 20 pallets of fine Nicaraguan coffee and one pallet that contained an untold amount of death and destruction.

Haveed’s load was sent to Washington, D.C.

Jamal’s load was destined for Chicago.

Mohamad was instructed to deliver his load to Los Angeles.

Ishmael’s load was headed to Las Vegas, Nevada.

Yasin was the last driver to leave the warehouse. He pulled out at 12:45 P.M. and headed his truck toward Atlanta, Georgia.

All of the drivers had been given specific instructions about their loads and had been asked to give up their cell phones. All except the last one, Yasin. Maybe Rahan was getting too excited about the fact that their mission was about to be completed. It was unlike him to miss a detail like that, but he totally forgot to ask Yasin for his cell phone.

Chapter 21

Dirk Pierson pulled into the parking lot of Scott Trucking, grabbed his laptop, and headed for his office. Will was pouring himself a cup of coffee in the lobby as Dirk entered.

“Good morning, Dirk,” Will greeted him in his usual cheery way. “How are you this fine morning? Ready to start a new day?”

“Yeah, I guess so,” Dirk replied.

Will turned and really got a good look at Dirk for the first time. “Woe—what happened to you? You look like you haven’t slept for a week. What’s going on?”

“Oh nothing. I really don’t want to talk about it.”

“Are you sure? Here, I’ll bring you a cup of coffee. Maybe that will help perk you up a bit.”

“Thanks.”

Dirk headed on down the hall to his office with Will following a short distance behind with two cups of steaming coffee. Dirk sat at his desk and booted up his desktop computer to check and see what was going on in the trucking world today.

Will handed Dirk his coffee and pulled up a chair. “We need to talk about the new account I have been working on in Chicago,” Will said.

“What new account is that?” Dirk replied as he nervously took a sip of coffee.

“I think I finally got a commitment from the Chocola Chocolate Company. They are the largest chocolate manufacturer in the world and supply major distribution centers all over North America with all kinds of candy. This will help put our trucks in strategic locations that will allow us to get better backhauls, which will, in turn, help us add more trucks and make a better return on our investments.”

"So what are we looking at? How many loads a week are we talking here?"

"They want to start tomorrow with two trucks. We will be ramping up from there to 20 loads per week going to different parts of the country." Will noticed that Dirk was sweating profusely. "Are you alright? Are you sick or something?"

"I'm fine," Dirk retorted a little too forcefully. "I'll get right on it. Don't worry about a thing."

"OK, well, if you need anything, let me know. I need to leave for a little while. I have a meeting with the accountant, and then the rotary club meets for lunch so I won't be back until sometime this afternoon, but you know you can always reach me on my cell phone."

"No problem, I got it taken care of," Dirk replied.

Will walked down the hall to his office wondering what Dirk's problem was this morning. Something sure was bugging him, that much was obvious.

Dirk turned to his computer and pulled up trucktracker.com. He logged in, and then punched in the code for Baraka's truck and saw that he was headed north on I-35. He quickly checked on the other five trucks and saw they were all in Laredo. *Good, he thought, looks like everything is going according to schedule.*

Dirk then took his cell phone and punched in the number he had been given a few days before and quickly sent a text with the username, password, and the codes for the six trucks in Texas to some unknown person he didn't know at some unknown location.



In Las Vegas, Nevada, Imam Yassar Hasrali was just finishing his breakfast of beyth (fried eggs with onions and tomatoes) and hobs (big, flat, pancake-shaped bread) when his phone beeped indicating that he had a text message. He immediately forwarded the message to

a number in Iran.

Yassar then went to his computer and logged on to his Facebook account. He changed his status to "Praise be to Allah for America's trucking industry."

He smiled to himself as he thought about the reaction around the country. Every Imam in six different cities knew exactly what that phrase meant. To everybody else, it just meant that he must have gotten a quick shipment of something that he was grateful for.

Yassar turned to his wife and said, "Start packing. We are leaving Las Vegas for a while."

"But why? Where are we going?"

"Never mind that, just pack everything you can. We will leave later today."



Abdas Hemati quickly jotted down the codes from the text message he had just received. After returning home from his trip to North Korea, he had retreated to a place that few people knew about. He had only told his family that he was going on another trip so they didn't even know where he was.

Abdas was now hidden in a cave that was close to his childhood home. He and his friend had discovered the cave when they were exploring in the mountains. It had always been their secret hideaway. Abdas had not been to the cave for years but knew now was the time to use the cave's seclusion to his advantage.

Abdas had seen the intelligence reports. Apparently someone in the United States had gotten suspicious of his plans and was putting out the word to bring him in so he decided to go into hiding. He had parked his car in a secluded ravine off of an old dirt road that was hardly ever traveled. From there, it was a 2-hour hike up into the mountains. He carried enough food for a week, along with a laptop

and cell phone with satellite communications technology and a solar-powered charger.

The cave Abdas was now hiding in was really just an overhanging rock on a ridge high up on the mountain with about a 10-foot square hole that allowed him to go back into the mountain where he was out of sight from anyone above or below his location. He placed the solar charger just to the left of the opening on a rock. Since the ridge was on the southern face of the mountain it would receive sunlight most of the day.

Inside his little hideaway he booted up the laptop computer, opened up trucktracker.com, and entered the username and password he had just received in the text message. He then entered the six codes and watched as six red dots became visible on a map of the United States. He smiled as he watched the red dots slowly move north through Texas. "Technology is a wonderful thing," he said to himself. "Here I am, sitting in a cave watching history unfold half a world away."

He moved the computer mouse over the first dot and a little box popped up that gave him all the information on that truck, the driver's name, the truck's speed, its destination, and the estimated time of arrival. He clicked on the box again and a screen popped up that gave him all the history information on that truck, where it had been, hours of driving time and down time, even when it had been serviced last.

Abdas grinned with a deep satisfaction as he realized how close his lifelong pursuit was to being accomplished. So far, the plan had gone perfectly. After years of painstaking planning, the time was finally right and while the world was focused on the revolutions and chaos in the Middle East, they were about to find out that destruction and chaos were coming to America's door.

Abdas looked at the clock in the corner of his computer screen and realized it was time to pray. He unrolled his little prayer carpet on the floor and faced east as he knelt on it. "Oh Allah," he prayed, "please

grant your servants victory as we punish the infidels for their unbelief and I pray that you would hasten the return of the righteous one, the Mahdi, to lead us to victory over the infidels so that all the world will know that you are the true God and your peace will be established in all the world. May you make our plans successful and grant the martyrs who are about to come to you their proper place in your eternal kingdom.”

Abdas got up and rolled up his carpet as he turned his attention back to the computer screen to continue the waiting game.

Chapter 22

Dirk checked trucktracker one last time as he prepared to go home. He could see that all six of the Scott Trucking trucks were heading steadily north out of Texas. Baraka's truck was heading east on I-30 toward Little Rock, Arkansas. Haveed was not far behind him, just leaving Dallas, Texas. Jamal was heading north of Dallas on I-35. Mohamad and Yasin were headed west on I-10 approaching El Paso.

It was 8 P.M. once again. It seemed like he never could get out of the office early. There were always challenges every day, and today was no exception. With three trucks broke down he had a difficult time finding enough trucks to cover all the loads, especially with the new account with Chocola Chocolate Company starting tomorrow. He did finally manage to get everything covered, but it had been a very stressful day and he was very tired.

Dirk's stomach reminded him that he hadn't taken time to eat all day so he whipped his big car into a convenience store to grab one of those awful pizzas that had been sitting in the warmer all day. *Hey, it's better than nothing*, he thought to himself as he waited in line to pay the cashier for the pizza and Diet Coke. *And right now, I could eat just about anything.*

When it was Dirk's turn to pay, he placed his items on the counter and reached into his pocket for his wallet when he heard a familiar voice say, "That will be four twenty-five, sir." Dirk looked up into the most beautiful brown eyes he had ever seen. He hadn't recognized her from a distance with her blond hair pulled back in a ponytail and a baseball cap on her head, but the voice and the eyes gave her away. Dirk opened his mouth to say something but seemed to have lost his voice once again. He dropped his wallet on the floor and stooped over

to get it, taking a little longer than necessary, glad for the chance to catch his breath.

The cashier spoke up. "I remember you. You were with Will and Patricia at the concert Friday night."

Dirk finally found his voice. "Yes, yes, I was and you are Megyn, right?"

"Yes, and you are Dirk . . . ummm, let me think, what is your last name again?"

"Pierson, What are you doing here? I thought you were a nurse."

"Oh, I am. I just needed something until I find the right nursing job and a friend from church owns this place and offered me a part-time job until I find something else. So, how did you like the concert the other night?"

"It was OK, I guess."

"OK, you guess? What kind of answer is that? I thought it was amazing! The music was fantastic, but the really great part was hearing those guys share their testimonies. Isn't it amazing how God can change people's lives and take someone like Richard, who was a criminal, and look at him now, using his gift of music for God's glory?"

"Well, I don't know about all that stuff."

"What do you mean? Aren't you a Christian?"

"No, I'm a Muslim."

"Oh my God! A Muslim! Are you kidding me? Why? What made you decide to become a Muslim?"

"Well, it's a long story, but I was in prison too, like Richard, but the guys who became my friends were all Muslim, and so I became one too. It's not so much different than your religion. After all, we believe in the same God, don't we?"

Meagan looked at him for a moment, then swept the store with her eyes, glad that there was no one else around. "Let me explain something to you," she said. "Here's the difference between your religion and mine. You believe that Allah is a supreme being who created

everything and that he gave the Holy Book, the Koran, to his prophet Mohammad, right?"

"Yes, that's right," Dirk said.

"We also believe in a supreme being, God," Megyn went on. "He also revealed himself, but not just to one man but to 40 different men over a span of 1,500 years, and that is what we call the Bible. Here is where we are very different. Your Koran teaches that Allah has no son, but the Bible teaches that God has a son, Jesus Christ, and the only way to get to heaven is to believe in the son."

Dirk smirked. "That's the problem with you Christians. You believe your way is the only way. What if you're wrong? What if it doesn't really matter what you believe as long as you're sincere?"

Megyn smiled with her huge captivating smile. "What if I'm right? What if you die and you hear Jesus say, 'Depart from me. I never knew you'? Then you'll be spending eternity in hell and through all eternity you'll be thinking, 'If only I had listened to that little blond chick in the convenience store.'"

Dirk laughed. "Yeah, right. Well, I better go. This pizza is bad enough when it's hot, and it's awful when it's cold."

"God bless you, Dirk, and think about what I said," Megyn said sweetly.

"I will," Dirk replied as he walked out the door.

Dirk got in his car and squealed the tires as he roared onto the street and headed the few blocks to his apartment. What was it with all these Christians preaching to him lately? Why couldn't they just leave him alone?

He parked his car in front of his apartment building as he thought to himself, *If these people only knew what was about to happen to them.* He tried to put the key into the lock but his hand was shaking so badly he dropped his keys. Then he realized he had left the pizza in the car so he went back and got his pizza. "What's wrong with me?" he muttered to himself. "It's like I have never seen a pretty girl before."

He finally got into the apartment but by then, he had lost his appetite completely. He turned the TV on and channel surfed for a while but finally decided he might as well go to bed and try to get some sleep.

After tossing and turning for what seemed like hours Dirk finally fell into a fitful sleep. Suddenly he was awakened by a feeling of a presence in the room. He opened his eyes to a brightness like nothing he had ever experienced before. In the middle of the brightness he could see the silhouette of a man standing at the foot of his bed.

Amazingly, Dirk felt no fear, only peace. The man reached out his hand and spoke with a voice unlike any voice he had ever heard. The voice was so smooth, so loving, so calm, and yet had such a commanding authority about it. "Come, take my hand," the figure said.

Dirk reached up and took his hand, so strong and steady. Somehow he knew this was Jesus. He wasn't sure how he knew, he just knew. Immediately, Dirk felt like there was a bolt of electricity flowing through his body that made him feel more alive than ever before. Every sense that he had was enhanced and heightened to a level he had never experienced before.

Dirk found his voice. "So you are real. Oh, Jesus, forgive me for doubting you. Forgive me for all the sins I have committed. I am not worthy to be visited by you." Dirk started sobbing uncontrollably as Jesus continued to hold his hand.

"My child, you are forgiven," Jesus said. "Now go and do my work. I have given you great and mighty things to do."

Just as quickly as the vision had appeared it was gone. Dirk found himself sitting up in bed and realizing what had just happened. He looked at the clock. Three A.M. He got out of bed and paced the floor as he cried and prayed. The tears he cried were happy tears, emotional tears as he felt all the garbage of his past being lifted off of his shoulders. For the first time in his life, he felt a real joy that he had never experienced before. Now he understood what was behind Megyn's

beautiful smile. Oh, he wanted to call her and tell her what just happened, but he hadn't even gotten her phone number.

Who could he talk to? He felt like he just had to tell somebody what just happened to him. Will. Yes, he would call Will, and surely he would understand. But at 3 in the morning?

Then the thought occurred to him. "Oh my God, what have I done?" he said aloud. "I have helped terrorists. How could God possibly forgive me for that?"

Dirk grabbed his cell phone beside the bed and dialed his boss's number. The phone started ringing and ringing. "Come on, wake up," Dirk yelled into the phone as if he could be heard on the other end.

Finally a sleepy voice answered. "Hello."

"Will, this is Dirk. You won't believe what just happened to me. Jesus came to visit me and a bright light and it was awesome and—"

"Hold it, slow down! What did you just say?" Will was fully awake now and sat up on the side of the bed.

"I said I saw Jesus and—"

"Hold it! What do you mean you saw Jesus?"

"I mean he was here in my room, he took my hand, he talked to me, he said he forgives me and everything."

"Wow, that's incredible. What did he look like?"

"I can't really say. It was very bright and beautiful. The eyes, yes, his eyes were so peaceful, so loving, I don't know how to explain it. I just can't find the right words."

"So was this like a dream or something?" Will asked.

"No. I was sleeping, and I woke up, and there he was. It was like surreal, but I was fully awake. A vision maybe, I don't know, but I just had to tell somebody."

"Wow, that's really neat. I'm so happy for you, so glad you called."

"There's something else I have done something that I think may be really bad, and I really need to talk to you about it. Can you meet me at the office?"

"You mean now?"

"Yes, now."

"Can't this wait till morning? Do you know what time it is?"

"Yes, I know what time it is, and no, it can't wait until morning. When I explain it to you I think you'll understand."

"Is this a good news-bad news type of deal or what? You call me to give me the good news first to make the bad news hurt less."

"No, it's not like that at all, but there is just something I have to tell you face to face. I am heading to the office now."

"OK, I'll be there. It's not like I can get back to sleep now anyway."

By this time Patricia was awake. "What's going on, baby?" she said sleepily.

"You're not going to believe this. Dirk had a vision of Jesus or something. He is all excited; sounds like he had quite an experience." Will got up and started getting dressed.

"Wow, that's cool," Patricia said. "So does this mean he is leaving his Muslim faith and becoming a Christian?"

"I certainly hope so. Maybe our prayers have finally been answered."

"That's awesome. Where are you going at this hour of the morning?"

"Dirk has something he wants to talk to me about. It must be important because he just declared that it couldn't wait until morning."

"OK, baby, call me later." Patricia rolled up into the covers to go back to sleep.

Chapter 23

Will parked his pickup truck in his usual spot at Scott Trucking. He noticed that Dirk was already there. He went in to find Dirk staring at his computer screen as if he were staring at a ghost.

“OK, what is this all about that is so important that it requires getting me out of my nice warm bed at this cold dark hour of the morning?” Will said.

Dirk replied, “Come over here and look at this screen.”

Will went around the desk and looked over Dirk’s shoulder. What he saw was a map of the United States from trucktracker.com with red dots indicating the location of six Scott Trucking trucks.

“OK, I see six trucks, what about it?”

“Remember those trucks I had to divert to Texas last week to pick up coffee?”

Will thought for a moment. “Yes, I remember there was something about being a rush job because Starbucks was about to run out of coffee or something like that.”

“Well, that wasn’t quite true. These six trucks are hauling something besides coffee.”

“What do you mean by that?” Will was starting to feel his blood pressure rising.

“Let me start at the beginning. I was approached last week and offered a lot of money to send these certain specific drivers down there. They never told me what they would be hauling, claimed something about a need to know basis and I didn’t need to know.”

“Who approached you? Who offered to pay you?”

“It was some people at the mosque last Friday.”

“Oh, this is just great! So a bunch of terrorists are using my trucks

to haul Lord only knows what to . . . Wait a minute, where are those trucks headed?"

Dirk moved his computer mouse over the first red dot and the little box popped up that gave them all the important information. Will noted that the truck's destination was New York City. The next one was Washington, D.C., then Chicago, Las Vegas, Los Angeles, and Atlanta.

"This can only mean one thing," Will said. "Those trucks are most likely hauling bombs for some kind of terrorist attack." He reached for his cell phone and speed dialed Patricia. She answered on the second ring. "Get down here now!" he yelled into the phone.

"What? What's going on?"

"Don't waste any time talking! Just get here now. I think we just uncovered a terrorist plot!"

"I'll be right there!" Patricia jumped out of bed and threw on some clothes as fast as she could as she ran for the door. She was glad there wasn't hardly any traffic at this time as she barreled down the road the couple of miles to the office. Within a matter of minutes, she came into the office at a dead run.

"What's going on?" she exclaimed as she saw Dirk and Will huddling over the computer.

Will quickly explained to her what they suspected was happening.

"This is unbelievable!" she exclaimed. "This is even bigger than you think. I've been tracking what we suspect are nuclear bombs from North Korea to Venezuela, and then shipped by submarine to somewhere in Central America, but then we lost them and now they are most likely in my husband's trucks barreling across America. How ironic. If it weren't so sickening it would be downright funny."

Patricia reached for her phone. "I'll call my boss and have those trucks stopped right away."

"No!" Dirk reached for Patricia's phone.

"What do you mean no? I suppose you have a better idea?" she said.

“Someone else has the codes for these trucks and could be watching their progress just like we are.”

Will spoke up. “You mean to tell me that you gave the codes for these trucks to someone else and they’re probably watching right now? That’s incredible! What were you thinking?”

“I don’t know. Obviously I wasn’t thinking. I guess I was just thinking about the money.”

Patricia was deep in thought. “So if they wanted the codes, that means they are watching so that when the trucks reach their destination they can be detonated, and we know they can detonate them from a cell phone anywhere in the world. We recently saw them detonate a bomb in Nevada from a cell phone in Iran.”

Will mused, “So if there is any suspicion that those trucks are off course, whoever is watching them could detonate them at any time.”

“That’s right. We have to come up with some way to fool this guy into believing his bombs are on course when they’re not.” Patricia’s mind was racing.

“How about stopping each truck and disarming the weapon, and then sending it on its way,” Dirk interjected.

“Sounds like a good idea, but I’m sure the terrorists already thought of that, so the bombs are probably made in such a way that if someone tries to tamper with them, they’ll go off automatically,” Patricia said. “What is the ETA of those trucks?”

Dirk moved his mouse over the red dots one by one as he read the data from the little pop-up boxes. “Looks like ETA for all the trucks is 10 A.M. on Thursday.”

“OK, so that is detonation time. We have got 30 hours to figure this out and stop these guys. I’m going to call my boss and brief him on this, and we’ll figure something out.” Patricia went over to Dirk and gave him a big hug. “By the way, welcome to the family. Will told me you accepted Jesus into your heart. I’m so excited about that. You’re doing the right thing here. We’ll get this all worked out.”

Patricia looked at the clock. Four A.M. She had no idea what time Justin got to the office since he was always there before she was, and she had never called him on his cell phone before although he had given her the number just in case there was ever an emergency. Patricia decided this qualified for an emergency so she looked up his cell number in her phone directory and pressed SEND.

"This is Justin Powell," he answered before Patricia's phone even had a chance to ring.

"Justin, I think I know where those nuclear bombs are," Patricia proclaimed.

"What do you mean you think you know?"

Patricia quickly explained to him all the details of the plot that they had uncovered so far.

"So, are you trying to tell me that the terrorists are using your husband's trucking company to distribute bombs all over the United States?"

"Yes, and not only that, if we try to stop them, whoever is watching them can detonate those bombs at any time. This does not look good."

"So what you are saying is that if we contact the police and have these trucks shut down, then some terrorist somewhere can just detonate them where they are. It might not cause as much damage as they had intended, but it would still be huge." Justin was starting to grasp the seriousness of what they were facing.

"That's exactly right, and I would bet that Abdas Hemati is the man who is sitting somewhere right now watching a computer screen and grinning with great satisfaction. Has there been any good news on locating him?"

"No, all we know is that he flew back to Iran and nobody has been able to locate him since. The CIA even picked up one of his colleagues yesterday, but he didn't seem to know where he is either. I'm going to call the president. This could be catastrophic, but let's keep it off the newswires for now. If this word gets out too early, they could decide

to detonate prematurely.”

“Yes, I think that’s wise,” Patricia said. “Is Mike Pence in the office yet?”

“No, it’s still a little early for him.”

“Could you have him call me as soon as he gets there? I have a hunch he might be able to help us out here.”

“Will do,” Justin said. “Why don’t you stay where you are and work from that angle? I’ll give the FBI a heads-up so they can get officers on the way to each of the trucks, but I will instruct them not to take action until we get something figured out to fool the detonator.”

Patricia gave Justin the current locations of all six of the trucks, then turned her attention back to Dirk. “Do these drivers have cell phones?”

“Yes, of course,” Dirk replied.

“Do you think they know what they’re doing or are they just innocent victims here?”

“Given the fact that they all have Middle Eastern names, I would say they are all in on it.”

“We have to try. Let’s see if we can talk them out of it. Get me one on the phone.”

Dirk dialed Baraka’s phone, but it went directly to his voice mail. Next he tried Haveed’s number and got the same response. “It looks like they got their phones shut off.”

“Try another one,” Patricia urged.

The next number he tried was Yasin’s. “Hello,” he said in his rich Middle Eastern accent.

“Yasin,” Dirk said, “I have someone here that wants to talk to you.” Dirk handed the phone to Patricia

“Hello, Yasin, this is Patricia Scott from the Department of Homeland Security. Are you aware of the danger you are in because of the package you are hauling?”

“Who are you and why are you calling me?”

“I am your boss’s wife, and I also work for the Department of

Homeland Security. We know you have a bomb in your trailer. You are going to die if you don't let us help you. Are you willing to let us help you?"

Yasin laughed into the phone. It was the most sickening sound Patricia had ever heard. "You Americans always think you have all the answers. You always think your way is best. Well, let me tell you something, Patricia. This time, Allah will win. You people killed my parents in Iraq. Soon, millions will die in the streets of America. Soon, Allah will reign, and America will be no more. Allahu Akbar!"

"Yasin, wait a minute, don't hang up. Maybe we can work something out here. You don't want to die, do you?"

"I am ready to die for Allah, yes."

"But you will take thousands of innocent lives with you."

"Only infidels, praise be to Allah who teaches us that infidels must die!"

"Yasin, don't you have family you care about?" Patricia was trying to grasp something that would make this man stop and think about what he was doing.

"Oh yes, I had family. They were all killed by an American missile in Iraq! Now it is my turn, and the whole world will know that there is no God but Allah and Mohammed is his prophet! Now, you know if you try to interrupt our operation it will be very bad for you. You can't stop us. The ship has sailed, and there is no turning back. You might as well sit back and enjoy the show!"

"Wait, wait!" Patricia yelled into the phone, but it was too late. He had hung up, and she was talking to a dead phone.

Yasin quickly dialed another number.

Sam Banscotti answered the phone. "Yes?"

"Dirk has turned on us," Yasin said.

"I was afraid that would happen. I'll take care of it."

Yasin took his phone and broke it in half and threw it out the window under a truck that was barreling down the highway beside him.

Chapter 24

Patricia's phone rang. It was Mike Pence.

"Hey, Mike, has Justin briefed you on what's going on?"

"Well, good morning to you too, and yes, I got the 15-second run-down. Now what can I do for Your Highness?"

"Oh, cut the BS. Here's the deal. These trucks are being tracked by the terrorists on trucktracker.com. Before we can intercept them, we need to make it look like the trucks are continuing on their predetermined routes. Is that something you can do?"

"I don't know. I'll need the truck codes and login info for truck-tracker. I suppose I could write a demo program that would place those trucks on there."

"How long would that take?" Patricia asked.

"Probably a couple weeks, maybe a week if I skipped all sleep and eating. No, then I'd be dead. I'll stick with a couple weeks."

"That is totally unacceptable. You've got hours not weeks. The lives of literally millions of people are depending on you getting this done. I'll e-mail you the codes you need now. Get to work like you have never worked before. Pull out all the stops on your hacking skills and get this thing done."

"Yes, Your Highness! I'll get right on it."

Patricia immediately e-mailed the codes to Mike from her phone. Sometimes she got very annoyed at Mike for all his goofiness, but she also realized that he was the very best at what he did and if anybody could pull this thing off, he could.

Chapter 25

Justin Powell had been trying for an hour to reach Julie Bails, the director of Homeland Security in Washington, D.C. Why was it these Washington bureaucrats were always so hard to reach? It seemed like they were always in a meeting or something. He had left his number with an assistant with instructions that it was urgent.

Finally his phone rang. "Hello, this is Justin."

"This is Julie Bails. I understand you have something important to tell me, and it better be important and make it quick. I have a meeting with the president in 10 minutes."

"Well, I'm sorry to bother you, Miss Bails," Justin said trying to hide his irritation at her high-and-mighty attitude. "I just thought you would want to be informed that we have uncovered a terrorist plot involving some nuclear bombs that have been smuggled into the United States by the Iranians."

"OK, so what's new? We have been hearing rumors of that for years. Do you have any hard evidence this time?" Julie said rather impatiently.

"Well, yes, as a matter of fact, we do. These bombs are loaded in trucks and even now as we speak are headed to six different cities around the country."

The phone fell silent for a moment. "Did you just say what I think you said?" Julie almost whispered into the phone.

"Well, if you think I said we are under a terrorist attack, then, yes, that is what I said."

"Then stop them! Do whatever it takes to stop them."

"It's not that simple, ma'am. We have reason to believe the terrorists are tracking the trucks by satellite, and if they get suspicious that

we are onto them, they can detonate the bombs at any time, causing untold amounts of damage.”

“What cities are they targeting?” Julie asked, much more amiable now.

“Looks like New York, Washington, D.C., Atlanta, Chicago, Los Angeles, and Las Vegas.”

“OK, so what’s your plan?”

“We’re working on programming the tracking system to make it look like the trucks are still continuing on to their destination before we take the trucks out. I will let you know as soon as that is accomplished. And by the way, I don’t think it would be a good idea to leak this to the press just yet. If the terrorists get wind of this, it’s hard telling what will happen.”

“OK, I’ll brief the president, but other than that, we will keep this under wraps for now. Call me as soon as you have any more news.” Julie then gave Justin her cell phone number and said, “You can text me any time. I’ll get it even if I’m in a meeting.”

“OK, I’ll keep you posted.” Justin hung up the phone and turned his high-backed swivel chair and stared out the window overlooking the suburbs of Chicago. Off in the distance he could faintly make out the outline of the famous Chicago skyline, the Sears Tower, and the John Hancock Building, along with the many other buildings that were monuments to the success of Chicago towering high above Lake Michigan. It was a sobering thought to think that if he didn’t successfully do his job, in less than 48 hours all of that would be gone forever, along with countless lives.

Justin thought to himself, *What am I missing here? These terrorists seem to think they have a foolproof system, but there is always a way around them. I just have to find it.* He grabbed a pad from his desk and started making a list of their options.

Option #1: Take the trucks out with military missiles.

Problem: Lots of radiation in the area wherever the trucks are

destroyed. The collateral damage could be immense.

Option #2: Have the police stop the trucks and let the bomb squads try to disarm the bombs.

Problem: As soon as Abdas Hemati or whoever it was that had the codes got suspicious that those trucks weren't moving he could detonate the bombs, causing an unbelievable amount of damage.

Option #3: Mike Pence would be able to fool the satellite tracking system into thinking the trucks were still on their way when they weren't.

Problem: They still had to figure out how to disarm the bombs, but it would buy them some time.

Justin got up and walked down the hall to Mike's office. Mike was bent over his keyboard madly pounding the keys and sweating profusely as if he had just finished a 30-minute workout. "How's it going, Mike?" Justin asked.

Mike jumped as if someone had just goosed him in the side "Oh my gosh, don't scare me like that. I've tried just about every trick of the trade, and I always hit a road block. This trucktracker system is good. Their level of security is better than our own Defense Department."

"Would it help if we got their programmer involved?"

"It looks like we'll have to. If I can just get the codes to get through their firewall I think the rest of it will be a piece of cake."

"OK, I'll call them," Justin said, already on his way back to his office. He pulled up the Web site of trucktracker.com and clicked on the CONTACT US link and dialed the phone number on the screen. Of course he got a computer menu that was a mile long. He pressed zero to speak to a live person and got another recording, "I'm sorry, all our customer service representatives are busy at the moment. Please leave your name and phone number and we will return your call as soon as possible."

Justin left a message. "This is Justin Powell from the Department of Homeland Security. We have an urgent matter of national security

that we believe you can help us with. Please call me back immediately.” He left his cell phone number and hung up, hoping these people returned their calls.

Justin then called his friend Willie Green in Memphis, Tennessee. Willie and Justin had gone to college together and had stayed in touch ever since. Willie had served some time in the marines, and then gone on to become the chief of police in Memphis, Tennessee.

“Hello, Justin,” Willie answered in his friendly southern drawl when he saw the ID on his cell phone.

“Willie, I need your help. There’s a truck coming through your city in a few minutes that has a nuclear bomb on it. The truck is on its way to New York City. You have a bomb squad, right?”

“Yes, we do, one of the best in the country.”

“OK, here is what I need you to do. Pull that truck over and arrest the driver but have another driver with you because the truck has to keep moving. We have reason to believe the terrorists are monitoring the location of these trucks by satellite and if anything looks wrong, they will detonate the bombs remotely.”

“Bombs?” Willie asked. “You mean there are more of them?”

“Yes, there are five more, but you just need to worry about this one. While that truck is stopped, get your bomb squad into the trailer and see if they can disarm the bomb. Now it is very important that your driver continues on the route that will be programmed into the truck’s GPS.”

“OK, do you have a description of the truck?”

Justin gave him a description of the Scott Trucking truck and said, “He’s coming into Memphis from the west on I-40. He should reach the I-55 interchange in about 15 minutes.”

“OK, I’m on it!”

“Just be careful,” Justin said. “We’re dealing with some very bad dudes here. It’s hard telling what kind of booby traps they have set.”

Willie hung up the phone and went into action. His marine training

had taught him to remain calm under pressure. He first barked an order to an officer at an adjoining desk. "Alert the bomb squad to get ready for deployment immediately." Then he picked up his radio and alerted a patrol car that was patrolling the west side of the city. He gave a brief description of the truck and said, "I want you to watch for him at the bridge. As soon as he crosses the Mississippi, I want you to follow him from a distance until we can get everything arranged here to take him down. Do not engage this truck until we have backup in place. Is that understood?"

"Yes, sir, I got it. I'm on my way now," the radio crackled.

Willie yelled across the room at the dispatcher, "I want 10 squad cars on Route 40 on the north side of town ASAP. Plus that bomb squad, and who do we have that can drive a truck?"

An officer that was just walking into the room raised his hand. "I can, Chief; I used to drive before I became a cop."

"OK, you have 1 minute to get out of that uniform and into some plainclothes and come with me. Come on, people, let's move!"

Chapter 26

Yasin pulled his truck into a rest area. It was time to take a break. The drivers had been coached to not draw any undue attention to themselves, and that meant to stay within their log times, and since their logs were filed electronically through trucktracker there was really no way to cheat the system because the office could check up on them in real time.

Yasin had been doing a lot of thinking for the last hour. He was trying to anticipate the next move that the Americans would make. One thing he was sure of, there was no way they were going to let him into Atlanta, and they knew exactly where he was because of trucktracker.

He laughed to himself when he thought about the simple solution he came up with as he parked the big rig in the rest area.

Yasin climbed out of the cab, and then up behind the sleeper to the satellite transceiver that was mounted on the roof. He took his pocketknife and cut the wires supplying the transceiver. Then he got back in his truck and roared out of the rest area. A mile down the road there was an exit, a little secondary road heading up into Arkansas. Yasin laughed to himself. "They think I'm going to Atlanta, but I'm not going to Atlanta. Allahu Akbar!"



Dirk Pierson was very tired. He felt like he hadn't slept for days. He had been sitting at his desk monitoring the progress of the terrorist brigade as he was beginning to call them. Apparently he had dozed off for a few minutes. He was startled into consciousness when Patricia yelled at him from the break room where she had set up a command center with her laptop and cell phone and was monitoring the situa-

tion as well. "Dirk, what happened to our other truck?"

Dirk snapped to attention and quickly typed in his password to bring his computer screen back to life since it was hibernating. He stared at the screen. There were now only five red dots instead of six. He checked all the codes and saw that Yasin's truck was the one that was missing. Dirk quickly reentered the code for Yasin's truck, but it came up "no signal." He quickly went through a checklist in his mind of all the scenarios that could make that happen. Sometimes if trucks went through a tunnel they would temporarily lose signal, but there were no tunnels in that part of the country. The only thing that could make that signal go away was for the transponder to completely lose power, and that meant the wires had to be cut because it was wired directly into the battery, so that even if the ignition was turned off, the transponder would still work.

Patricia came busting into Dirk's office. "What's going on with truck number six, Dirk?"

"There are about three possibilities. Scenario number one, the truck has been in a very bad accident and has lost all power to the computer system. Scenario number two, the bomb has exploded prematurely and has taken out a large section of Arkansas. Scenario number three, Yasin thinks he has a better chance reaching his destination by not allowing us to track where he is."

Patricia thought for a moment. "If he was in an accident the phone would be ringing here as soon as the police discover it's a Scott Trucking truck, right?"

"That's right."

"If it's option number two, there would be something on the news immediately. I have Fox on in the break room, and I didn't see anything. I'm going with option number three. Yasin is going AWOL. We need to stop him as soon as possible."

Patricia picked up her phone to call her boss. "Justin here," he answered.

“Justin, one of the trucks just lost its satellite signal. We think the driver did it so we can’t track him. This is very dangerous. Whoever is watching this for the terrorists may come to the wrong conclusion and decide to detonate prematurely. How is Mike coming with his work?”

“He’s working on it, but is still having problems. I have tried to call trucktracker.com to see if they can help us but just get an answering machine.”

“Forget calling! Send someone to their office. It’s only a few blocks from you. I remember going there with Will when he was setting this system up.” Patricia gave him the address.

“Great, I’ll go over there myself, and I’ll also put out an APB on that truck. We can pick it up now. What was its last known location?”

“It was on I-20 east of Shreveport, Louisiana, headed toward Atlanta, Georgia. That was 20 minutes ago.”

“Got it. Gotta go!”

Justin quickly found the number for the Louisiana state police and briefly explained the situation to the person who answered the phone. “There is a truck carrying a very powerful nuclear bomb traveling across your state. We believe the truck is on its way to Atlanta, Georgia, and we need you to stop it immediately. The truck was last seen on I-20 east of Shreveport about 20 minutes ago. Have your bomb squad ready but do not take further action until I give you instructions. Here is the description of the truck.” Justin gave the officer the description as he headed out the door.

Officer Brown barked into his radio, “Attention, all officers, this is a code red. I repeat, a code red. We have been alerted by DHS that we have a truck in our state that is believed to be carrying a nuclear bomb. The truck will be a white, late-model Kenworth, The name on the truck is Scott Trucking from Plainfield, Illinois, and the license number is P18567. The truck was last seen 22 minutes ago on I-20 east of Shreveport. You are authorized to use whatever force necessary to stop this truck.”

Officer Brown then barked an order across the room, "Get those choppers in the air! Let's find this guy."



Abdas Hemati checked his computer screen. He noticed there was one red dot missing. That could only mean one thing. Their plot had been discovered. He reached for his cell phone. "I will show those arrogant Americans!" he exclaimed. "I'll show them that they can't outsmart Allah's plan!"

Abdas had all six of the numbers preprogrammed in a group, and all he had to do was send a text message to all six receivers simultaneously, and it would bring an untold amount of death and destruction on the Great Satan. He carefully and deliberately typed in a message, ALLAHU AKBAR. All he had to do was push SEND. He hesitated as he checked the screen again. He noticed that the other five red dots were still moving steadily toward their destinations. What if there was another explanation? He started trying to think out different scenarios. What if this truck just had a malfunction of some kind? If the truck was discovered, surely it would be on the news. He quickly opened another browser and checked CNN.com. He scanned the headline page. There were all the usual stories about the politics of the upcoming election. The latest news about who got voted off of *American Idol*, and some life interest story about a 75-pound woman who couldn't gain weight, but there was nothing there about a terrorist attack.

Abdas decided, "I'll wait and see what happens." He closed his phone and plugged it into the solar-powered charger.



Justin Powell entered the office of Trucktracker.com at a dead run. He flashed his credentials as he yelled at the lady behind the first desk he saw. "I'm Justin Powell from the Department of Homeland Security. We have a national emergency, and I need to talk to your Web

site programmer immediately!"

"OK, that would be Jason Dean. I'll page him for you," she said as she reached for the phone.

"No, you won't," Justin said as he grabbed her arm and yanked her out of her chair. "You will take me to his desk. I know how you people are about answering your phones."

"OK, stop squeezing my arm. Man, are you having a bad day or something?"

"Yes, I'm having a very bad day, and you will be too if I don't find this Jason guy immediately!"

"OK, follow me."

The secretary led Justin over to a stairway. It was obvious that trucktracker.com was an Internet-based business that didn't expect many of their customers to actually come to their office. The building was old and needed paint; the main room consisted of a string of mismatched desks covered with computers that were connected with a hodgepodge of wires running everywhere. They were now heading down a flight of rickety wooden stairs into the basement that opened up into another large room of computers that seemed like they were thrown together in a hurry.

"Pardon our mess," Justin's guide apologized. "Our business has been growing so fast we haven't had time to organize everything properly. Here's Jason," she said as they arrived at a desk in the middle of the room that looked like the center of a hub of activity. Behind an array of computer monitors sat a young man that looked like he could have been a teenager playing video games. Sitting there pounding on his keyboard with his eyes darting from screen to screen, he had a curly black Afro sticking out all around his head which was covered with a baseball cap, on backward, of course.

Great! Justin thought to himself, *Why do all these computer geeks have to be these young weird types?* But without giving his guide time to introduce him Justin flashed his credentials to the young man. "Hi, I'm

Justin Powell with the Department of Homeland Security. We have a problem, and you are going to help us solve it.”

Jason pushed back a bit from his desk, startled. “OK, what is this all about? What exactly do you expect me to do?”

“Listen, we have six trucks crossing the United States right now with bombs on them. We have reason to believe the terrorists are using your system to track those bombs. We need you to help our guy Mike Pence to set up a program that makes it look like those trucks are still moving while we take them down. Give me your phone.”

Jason, with a look of terror in his eyes, handed his phone to Justin.

Justin started dialing a number. “I’m connecting you to Mike Pence. He will tell you exactly what he needs. Can I expect your full cooperation?”

“Oh, yessir!” Jason exclaimed nervously.

Mike picked up the phone. “This is Mike,” he said.

“Mike, I’m at the office of trucktracker.com. I’m going to give the phone to their computer geek, Jason. He has promised to give you whatever you need.” Justin handed the phone to Jason and headed for the stairs.

Chapter 27

Willie Green sped north on Hollywood Street as fast as he dared with lights flashing and siren blaring on his unmarked car. The truck they were looking for had been spotted heading east on I-40 and was fast approaching the Hollywood Street Exit where they had backup patrol cars ready to stop the truck.

The bomb squad was on its way behind him but were a bit slower with the big truck full of equipment they were bringing.

Willie's radio crackled. "This is Car 53. I'm following the Scott Trucking truck. We are 1 mile out from Exit 5."

Willie responded. "OK, Car 53, let's see if this is going to be easy. Turn on your lights and see if he will pull over. We have backup ready at Exit 5."

"Roger that," Car 53 answered. He quickly pulled out and passed the two cars that were between him and the truck as he flipped on his lights.

In the truck, Baraka glanced in his rearview mirror and saw the flashing lights coming up behind him. *Oh great, he thought, why am I being stopped? I'm not speeding. I have tried hard not to draw attention. Have we been discovered?* Then he thought, *No, if they knew what's in this trailer, there would be 20 police cars, not just one. It's probably just a DOT officer with nothing else to do but irritate another truck driver.* For a fleeting moment he thought about ignoring the cop and keep right on driving but his good sense soon took over and he realized he would never make it to New York like that so he decided to take his chances that he would be able to soon get rid of this officer. Baraka slowed down and carefully eased to the side of the road as he brought the big rig to a halt just short of Exit 5.

"This is Car 53. The truck has been successfully stopped just short of Exit 5."

Baraka was looking down rummaging through some papers for the paperwork that he knew the officer would ask for. Suddenly he looked up to see five patrol cars barreling down the exit ramp the wrong way. "Oh God, no!" he exclaimed as he reached over to release the air brakes and jammed the big rig in gear.

The first patrol car pulled up beside him just as the truck started moving. The officer jumped from the car and grabbed the handrail on the side of the truck. He pulled the door open and grabbed Baraka by the neck and literally threw him out of the truck onto the road. The officer pushed in the clutch and brought the truck to a stop.

Baraka found himself surrounded by officers with their handguns all pointing at his head.

Willie pulled up in his car and jumped out. "Good job, men! OK, let's clear the way for the bomb squad. I want this roadway cleared immediately." He turned to the substitute driver. "Get in that truck and as soon as the bomb squad gets in the trailer, head on down the road. Drive the speed limit and be careful to follow the GPS in the truck."

Willie then turned to the officers. "I want cars in front and behind this truck. No one is to come within 1 mile of this truck. You understand?"

"Yes, sir," they said in unison.

He turned to one of the officers that was handcuffing Baraka "Get this scumbag back to the station for questioning."

The bomb squad was cutting the padlock off the trailer with a cordless grinder, then they opened the doors. "I don't see a bomb one of them yelled. Looks like a load of coffee!"

"Keep looking!" Willie yelled back as he made his way to the back of the trailer.

Baraka spoke up for the first time "Just coffee. I take coffee to New York. Why you stop me? Because I am Arab, is that why? I just

haul coffee.”

“Shut up!” Willie yelled at Baraka. He turned to the officer who had climbed into the truck. “Climb up across there and see what you find.”

The officer climbed up unto the pallets of coffee and made his way forward through the truck. Each pallet seemed to be the same with about 50 bags of coffee on each one. It sure smelled like coffee. He made it all the way to the front and turned to make his way back stepping on each pallet as he went. The bags of coffee had a certain softness to them as he carefully made his way along not wanting to tear the bags. But wait! One bag seemed firmer than the others. The officer reached down and pulled the stretch wrap back and removed the bag which he discovered was only partially filled with coffee so that it would lay flat giving it the appearance of a full bag but leaving room for what he discovered underneath, something that made the goose bumps stand up on his arms. A shiny stainless steel box. “I found it!” he yelled.

From the back of the trailer Willie barked orders. “Get in there and see what you can do. Be careful. We don’t know for sure what we’re dealing with here.”

Five men grabbed the tools they thought they would need from the bomb squad truck and climbed into the back of the trailer. Willie closed the doors and signaled the driver to go. The big rig slowly pulled back onto the interstate and continued its journey toward its destination with the bomb squad truck following closely behind.



Justin had just gotten back to the office when his cell phone vibrated. He saw that it was his friend from Memphis. “Hello, Willie, I hope you have some good news for me.”

“Yes, we have the bomb squad in the truck working on it now. I’ll keep you posted if we learn anything.”

Justin called Patricia and gave her an update on what was going on. "We have arrested one of the drivers, and they are questioning him now in Memphis. We have a bomb squad in the truck attempting to disarm the bomb, and Mike should be getting pretty close on setting up that computer program."

"OK, let me guess, they found a stainless steel canister that is totally welded shut."

"I can't answer that. I don't have that information yet."

Just then, something on the TV that was always playing in the break room which also doubled as a driver's lounge caught Patricia's attention. The screen flashed the bright yellow banner NEWS ALERT! The announcer said, "This is a Fox News alert. We have just found out that the Louisiana state police are doing a massive hunt this hour for a truck that allegedly is carrying a nuclear bomb. Our sources tell us that authorities believe the truck is heading for Atlanta, Georgia." The screen showed aerial video obviously from a helicopter showing multiple police cars speeding down an interstate highway.

"Have you seen this?" Patricia asked Justin.

"Seen what?" he asked.

"According to Fox News, the police in Louisiana are doing a massive hunt for a truck carrying a nuclear weapon."

"Oh crap! How did that get out already?"

"You know how those newspeople are. They monitor police radio frequencies all the time. This is gonna be great. Now we're going to have the news media all over us. This could create a panic in this country like we've never seen before!"

Just then, there was another yellow NEWS ALERT! banner that flashed across the screen. The screen then panned to another chopper view, this time of a truck going down the highway being followed by a smaller truck that said BOMB SQUAD on the side of it. The anchor's voice came back on. "We have just received this footage from our affiliate in Memphis, Tennessee. As you can see, this truck is being followed by a

bomb squad truck. Reportedly, there are patrol cars in front and behind this truck blocking traffic. We are not sure what this means or if this is related to the truck they are looking for in Louisiana that we just reported on a few minutes ago. Is this the same truck? Are there two trucks carrying these bombs? Could there be more? We don't know, but we will keep you posted as we find out more information."

"Justin, you might want to turn on your TV. They are now reporting on the bomb squad in Memphis."

"I just did. OK, I had better call the director."

Justin dialed Julie Bails. "Hello, this is Julie," she answered pleasantly as if there was absolutely nothing in the world to worry about.

"Julie, this is Justin Powell from Chicago. Fox News has gotten a hold of our story and is blabbing it all over the world. I'm sure they'll be calling you wanting a statement of some kind about what's going on."

"I'm sure they will, and exactly what is going on, Justin?"

Justin gave her a brief update of their progress up to this point. When he had finished there was a long pause on the phone. Finally, Julie said, "Do you realize what will happen if I go on national television and say that we have reason to believe there are nuclear weapons heading for six U.S. cities and that we aren't sure we can stop them? We'll have a panic like we have never seen. People will be running over each other to leave the cities and hundreds, maybe thousands, could be killed from that alone."

"Oh, yes, I realize that, and it gets worse. I'm sure the terrorists are capable of monitoring the news channels, and the minute they realize that their mission has been compromised they will detonate those bombs. They may not do the damage they had originally intended, but they will still do immense damage. Is there any way you can get the news media to back off? Tell them this is a matter of national security or something."

"Do you have any idea what the political ramifications would be of

doing that if this whole thing went south and those bombs do go off? We would be accused of trying to cover it up.”

Justin was starting to feel his blood boil. “That’s what’s wrong with you people in Washington. All you ever think about is politics. How is this going to effect the next election? Listen, lady, if this thing goes south you won’t have to worry about the next election because you’ll be dead! If I were you, I would at least get the president out of town and do your best to shut these newspeople up so we can do our job!”

“How dare you talk to me like that! Just who do you think you are?” Julie spouted back. “Let me remind you that *I* am the one in charge here and *I* will do what I think is best for our country, and in the meantime, you had better focus on shutting these things down as soon as possible. And for your information, the president and his family *are* out of town.”

“Oh really? I wasn’t aware that the president was on another trip. Where did he go this time?”

Justin had become frustrated as many others had with the current president’s frequent trips abroad on the taxpayers’ dollar. It seemed like he was spending more time taking his family on some fabulous vacations than he was actually governing the largest economy in the world.

“Oh, he suddenly decided yesterday that the family needed to take a trip to Italy.”

“Really? Why wasn’t there anything in the press about this?” Justin asked.

“Well, I suppose for security reasons. You know how it is. You just can’t be too careful these days. I have informed the President of the situation and he will be returning to the states shortly.”

“Yes, ma’am. Well, I’ve got work to do,” Justin said as he pushed END on his phone. “Politicians!” Even though Julie wasn’t an elected official but appointed by the president, her job was to do whatever it took to make the president look good, and sometimes that meant do-

ing things that absolutely didn't make sense to most people.

Justin wrinkled up his forehead like he always did when he was deep in thought. *Italy? Really? Why now when Congress is in session trying desperately to hammer out a budget deal to prevent a government shutdown and the president flies off to Italy for a vacation? Really? That seems a bit odd.*

Justin shook his head as if to shake the thoughts that were coming to him out of his mind. Those thoughts were borderline conspiracy theory. "I don't think I'll ever understand how these politicians think."

Chapter 28

Will and Patricia Scott were sitting in the driver's lounge anxiously monitoring the situation when they both saw a news van pull up, complete with the satellite dish on top and everything.

"Oh no, this is all we need," Patricia exclaimed.

"I'll head them off at the door," Will said as he stood from the table. "What shall I tell them?"

"As little as possible. This is an ongoing investigation, and we'll let them know as soon as we have something to report."

Will exited the building as the camera crew came leaping out of the news van with their cameras already trained on him. A little brunette news reporter approached him with microphone in hand. "Sir, we would like to speak with the owner of Scott Trucking, please."

"I am the owner of Scott Trucking," Will replied calmly.

She extended her hand. "Nice to meet you, sir. I am Tracy Smith from KMII news. We would like to ask you a few questions, sir."

Will shook her hand. "Will Scott, pleased to meet you, Tracy. What can I do for you?"

"We understand that one of your trucks has been implicated in some kind of a bomb threat in Memphis. Are you aware of that, sir?"

"Yes, ma'am, I am, and I can assure you we are doing everything we can to assist the authorities in this situation."

"Did this truck get stolen by the terrorists, or were some of your own employees involved?"

"This is an ongoing investigation, and I am not able to disclose that information at this time."

"Are there more trucks involved besides this one in Memphis? Earlier, we had heard about a massive hunt for a truck in Louisiana. Is

that in any way connected to this truck in Memphis?"

"I am really not at liberty to comment about that. The Department of Homeland Security is working diligently to resolve this situation, and you will have to get your information from them."

"Do you have DHS personnel here on the property now?" Tracy kept prodding.

"Yes, we do."

"I would like to speak to whoever you have here from DHS."

"I will pass that message along, but I am sure you will understand that everyone inside is very busy right now."

"I understand. We are going to wait right here for any new developments on this case. Thank you for your time, sir."

"You are welcome. I will let you know when we have more information."

Will went back into the building and went into his office and called the Plainfield chief of police.

Bill Bailly answered the phone. "What's up, Will? You ready to play that round of golf we've been talking about?"

"No, believe me, Bill, golf is about the furthest thing from my mind right now. Could you send a couple of squad cars over here to the office? There's a story about to break on the news and we might need some protection, if nothing else than from some overzealous journalists."

"Sure thing, what's going on?"

"Believe me, you don't want to know. I gotta run. Just get us some cars, OK?"

"Will do. Shucks, I'll even come myself. See ya in a few minutes."

Patricia was on the phone with Justin. "What have you heard from the Memphis bomb squad?"

"Well, they found just what you thought they would find. A 3 foot by 3 foot square stainless steel canister with all welded seams. They are getting ready to drill a small hole through the stainless steel so they

can insert a mini video camera to see if it's booby trapped."

"They better be praying they don't hit something vital on the way in."

"These guys are good, some of the best in the country. We have to trust that they know what they are doing."

"I have a really bad feeling about this, Justin. We're missing something here."

"I think we are beyond your feminine intuition here. Let's let the experts take over."

"It's your call, Boss."

"OK, wait a minute. Here comes Mike. Maybe he has some good news." Justin looked at Mike expectantly.

"I got it. The dummy program is up and running. All six trucks appear to be progressing on to their destinations."

"Good work, Mike," Justin said. "Patricia, did you hear that? Now we can shut them down. I have some calls to make."



The five men in the back of the Memphis truck stared at the silver canister in front of them. None of them had ever seen anything quite like this before. They had quickly removed the bags of coffee from around the bomb so they could have full access to it. There didn't seem to be any kind of access plate at all. The canister was totally sealed. They finally decided that the only course of action was to carefully drill a very small hole, and then slowly enlarge it up to half an inch so they could insert a mini video camera to see what was inside, and then they could determine where they could safely cut the shell away to get access to the real bomb.

After some discussion it was determined that Trenton would be the one to do the drilling. Trenton was about 30 years old, big and strong with a steady hand. Then the discussion turned to where they should drill. Some thought the end would be better, others thought on

top. It was finally decided to drill in an upper corner that would give them the best view of the top, one end, and one side of the canister.

Trenton took a DeWalt cordless drill and inserted a $\frac{1}{8}$ inch drill bit and started drilling. The steel was very hard to drill, and Trenton put his muscle into pushing the drill into the steel. After what seemed like a long time, but was only actually a few minutes, the bit went through the metal. Trenton released the switch on the roaring drill and pulled the bit out. As the sound of the drill faded away, the men all heard another sound. An ominous sound. It was the sound of compressed air escaping from the new hole. They all came to the same conclusion at the same time. Trenton yelled, "Pressure swi—"

Suddenly, there was a bright flash and then blackness.



Patricia saw there was another NEWS ALERT! on the TV as a reporter once again went back to the chopper hovering over Memphis. "We have been watching this scenario now for a while unfolding in Memphis. We understand there is reportedly a bomb inside the truck. You can see there is a bomb squad following the truck. Why don't they just stop the truck? We're not sure, and the chief of police down there has refused to talk to us. Says he kind of has his hands full right now, and I'll bet he does. The truck is approaching the exit ramp, and I believe he is taking the exit. Yes, he is. Looks like he is heading east on I-40. We will keep you post—"

Suddenly there was a huge ball of fire from the truck, and then the screen went black.

"What was that? Did I just see what I think I saw? Did that truck just explode? We seem to have lost the feed from the chopper. Did the explosion take out our chopper? We don't know, but we will find out. Let's take a quick break, and we'll be right back." The camera panned back to the anchor who was trying to put on her fake smile but was really having a hard time.

Patricia let out a scream that brought everyone in the building out to see what was going on. Will grabbed her by the shoulders. "What's wrong?"

Patricia was pointing to the TV with one hand and covering her mouth with the other. "Memphis," she muttered. "Bomb squad drilled, exploded."

"Get your hand off your mouth," Will ordered. "What did you say?"

Patricia regained her composure. "The truck in Memphis just exploded. Fox News caught it live. I knew we were missing something. Those bastards had the bomb booby-trapped with a pressure switch. *That's* why they are all sealed units. They pressurize the tanks so that if anyone tampers with them, it relieves the pressure from a switch that hits the igniter and sets off the bomb. When the bomb squad drilled their precious little hole to insert a video camera it only took a second to relieve the pressure—and *boom!*"

"Do you mean to tell me that Memphis just got obliterated?" Will was stunned.

"Watch." The video was replaying on the TV screen showing the last several seconds of footage. Everyone in the room watched as the truck explodes, and then the screen went black. The news anchor came back on. "This happened just a few minutes ago in Memphis, Tennessee. We are trying to find out more information, but we seem to have lost contact with our affiliate there. Apparently, the bomb that was reportedly in that truck exploded. We know there was a bomb squad in that truck working on the bomb. What we don't know is if they accidentally set the bomb off or if someone else detonated the bomb remotely. We also don't know yet just what type of bomb this was or how much damage has been done. We are doing everything we can to get more information about this incident and will bring that to you as soon as we have it."

The room was deathly quiet. The feeling of helplessness washed over them as they realized the impact of what had just happened. What they had just witnessed was something so horrific and unimaginable

that it was hard for them to comprehend.

Each one in the room had their own thoughts. Guilt. Shame. Why hadn't they discovered the plot sooner? What could they do now? Where was the next one going to hit? There were five more out there.

Chapter 29

Haveed had just left Greensboro, North Carolina, on I-85. He was feeling lighthearted and happy that his mission would soon be over. This trip had been easier than he could have ever imagined. The scales that he had to pass on the way had not been a problem at all, and now he was nearing his destination of Washington, D.C. He smiled as he thought about what the headlines might say tomorrow morning. "BIGGEST TERRORIST ATTACK IN THE HISTORY OF THE WORLD!" Or "AMERICA'S LEADERS ALL DEAD." Or how about this one? "IRAQIS TAKE REVENGE ON U.S." Whatever the headline would be, he was sure of one thing, that all over the Middle East he would be praised as a hero and that was all that mattered to Haveed.

Suddenly Haveed heard a siren that brought him out of his daydream. He looked in his rearview mirror to see two police cars barreling toward him at a high rate of speed. Behind them he could see more police cars with lights flashing holding back traffic. Haveed brought his eyes back to the front and saw there was a roadblock in front of him.

His heart sank. Apparently their plans had been discovered. This was obviously not a routine traffic stop. He had to make a split-second decision. His mind raced. If he stopped and allowed them to arrest him he would be spending the rest of his life in jail. That option seemed unacceptable to him. Haveed mashed the accelerator to the floor. The big five hundred-horsepower Detroit diesel came to life like a sleeping giant as the big rig picked up speed and rocketed down the highway.

A lot of fleets had governors on their trucks to limit their speeds, but Will had never been a fan of those because many of his trucks ran out West where higher speeds were allowed.

Haveed approached the roadblock at close to a hundred miles an hour. He saw rifles pointed at his head so he crouched down just so he could see over the dash. Glass splattered everywhere as the windshield exploded in a hail of bullets. The last thing he saw before he hit were police officers leaping out of the way of the screaming truck, and then he felt the first bump as he hit the first cars and sent them flying into the median. Haveed hung onto the wheel tightly and tried to keep the truck straight but something was wrong. His steering had been so severely damaged by the crash that he couldn't turn the wheel, and the truck was careening out of control. There was a viaduct just ahead, and the last thing Haveed saw were the concrete pillars in the median that were holding the bridge up rapidly approaching. Then there was nothing but blackness.

The officers that survived the crash looked on in horror as the truck and trailer seemed to leave the ground as the sides of the trailer crumpled and coffee beans were strewn all over the highway. They watched in horror as a shiny silver box was catapulted up over the bridge in a high-flying arc and landed in the soft grass of the median on the other side.



In a little truck stop just outside Los Angeles sat a Scott Trucking truck. Mohamad was running ahead of schedule and decided to stop and get some sleep. Four California state patrol cars rolled up simultaneously with lights flashing and sirens blaring and blocked him in front and back.

Mohamad woke with a start and a sinking feeling in his stomach as he heard an officer speaking through his car's loudspeaker. "Scott Trucking driver, we have you surrounded. Come out of the sleeper and let us see your hands. I repeat, you are surrounded. Come out of the sleeper now so we can see you."

Mohamad swore under his breath as he reached under his mattress

and pulled out an AK-47 that had been smuggled into the country for him. He wasn't about to go down easy, and with a little luck, he may be able to take these guys out and still get to his destination in time. He pulled back the curtain of his sleeper just slightly to assess the situation. He could see four officers in front of the truck with their guns drawn, and he assumed there were probably four more behind the truck. He checked his gun to make sure it was loaded and ready, then pulled back the curtain and slipped the gun up between the front seat and the door. "OK, I'm coming out!" he yelled as he stood up.

"Put your hands up where we can see them," came the voice over the loudspeaker.

Mohamad made his way to the door, opened it, and stepped out. As he climbed down from the truck, he turned as if to grab the hand-rail but instead, grabbed the AK-47 and in one fluid motion jumped to the ground as he brought the gun around and started spraying a hail of deadly bullets on the officers in front of the truck.

On the right side of the truck, Officer Tom McAllister had been making his way slowly along the trailer from the rear of the truck. When he heard the shots being fired from the opposite side of the truck, his adrenaline-charged reflexes kicked into gear, and without even thinking what he was doing or the danger he was putting himself into, he dropped to the ground and rolled underneath the truck, coming out on the other side just as the terrorist was bringing his menacing weapon around toward the rear of the truck. To Tom, everything suddenly seemed in slow motion. Split seconds seemed as long minutes as he brought up his 9 mm pistol and fired at the figure that was rapidly bringing the rifle to bear on his head. In that split second when their eyes met, Tom saw a look of pure hatred like he had never seen before in his life, and in the next instant, he saw the terrorist's head explode as the 9 mm bullet met its mark.



Ishmael pulled into the truck stop just outside Las Vegas, Nevada. It was time to get cleaned up. It was a Muslim tradition for the jihad martyrs to ceremonially wash themselves before they did their acts of terrorism, and this was his last opportunity. He grabbed his duffel bag that had a clean pair of clothes and all his bathing necessities in it and headed for the showers. He didn't notice the man leaning against the side of the building smoking a cigarette.

The man was Officer Jake Webber, a plainclothes detective from the Las Vegas Police Department. He had been briefed several hours ago about this truck and had also been told about the difficulties they had bringing down the other trucks. The one in Memphis had exploded when the bomb squad had tried to disarm it, causing an untold amount of casualties. The one in Greensboro had ended in a massive crash killing the driver and three police officers. When they tried to arrest the driver in Los Angeles, he had opened fire and two officers had been killed and another injured. He was only saved by his bullet-proof vest.

Jake was determined to not let any of those things happen here and decided to bide his time and look for an opportunity to use the element of surprise. When he saw the driver had entered the building, he nonchalantly extinguished his cigarette in the box of sand on top of the trash can and leisurely entered the building. He was just in time to see the terrorist retrieve a key for a private shower room and a towel from the desk and disappear down the hall.

Jake signaled for his two partners who were sitting at a booth in the restaurant to join him as he made his way to the counter.

Jake flashed his badge to the young man behind the counter that had his head so full of piercings he looked like a jewelry store rack. The young man got a look of fear in his eyes like a deer that was ready to take flight. "I'm not after you, stupid," Jake barked. "I need you to tell me which shower room you gave to that man that just left, and then I need a master key."

The young man took a moment to calm down before he could speak. "Room 12," he said as he reached under the counter and retrieved a master key. "What did he do?"

"He hasn't done it yet," Jake replied as he turned to walk away. "And believe me, you don't want to know."

The three officers took up positions outside shower room number 12 and waited. When they heard the sound of the shower running, Jake silently turned the key and the three men rushed in. Ishmael didn't stand a chance, and needless to say, he was very surprised.



Jamal was singing along with the radio as he headed up Interstate 55 approaching Bloomington, Illinois. He had been in America long enough that he had learned to love country music. There was just something about the way the country songs told stories that appealed to him, especially the sad songs. Maybe it was because of the fact that his own life had been one long sad story. His childhood had been scarred by the death of his parents. He had tried to find fulfillment by joining the rebel fighters in Iraq, but all the killing had just left him numb. He had tried on numerous occasions to have a relationship with a woman, but he just couldn't seem to get it right and those relationships never seemed to last very long. So the sad songs about cheating and heartbreak appealed to him because he could relate to them, but occasionally when one of those patriotic songs came on, like Lee Greenwood's "I'm Proud To Be An American," it made him furious.

Today was no exception as he neared the I-74 and I-55 junction Toby Keith's song "Courtesy of the Red, White, and Blue" came on the radio. Normally, he switched the station or turned the radio off when a song like that came on, but today, he decided to let it play. The song was obviously about America's reaction to the terrorist attacks on the Twin Towers on September 11, 2001. Jamal could hear the crowd cheering in the background as Toby belted out the threats about

America's boys and girls going after the people that had planned those attacks. Toby sang in his rich country voice, "as soon as we could see clearly through our big black eye, man, we lit up your world like the Fourth of July." Jamal realized for the first time that what he was singing about were exactly the attacks that had rained down on his family in Iraq. The attacks that had brought so much destruction and death to his community and had motivated him to become a jihad fighter.

Toby sang on. ". . . when you feel like the whole wide world is raining down on you, brought to you courtesy of the red, white, and blue."

At that, Jamal slammed his fist on the dash and yelled at the top of his voice, "Yes, it did feel like the whole wide world was raining down on us, but now it's payback time. Red, white, and blue, you are about to experience what we have experienced, and much more! The time has come for Allah and his people to be victorious over the Great Satan!"

Suddenly the song stopped. "We interrupt this program to bring you a special newscast. There has been a major terrorist attack in Memphis, Tennessee. It appears there has been some kind of nuclear explosion on the east side of the city. We are not yet sure how much damage has been done or the number of lives that have been lost, but the damage appears to be massive. This station has also received information that there are at least five more bombs on their way to major cities. Apparently they are being shipped there in trucks. We will keep you informed as we get more information on this tragic incident." The music resumed playing.

Jamal was stunned. Memphis wasn't one of their targets. What could have possibly gone wrong to detonate that bomb in Memphis? Plus, it was still too early.

All of a sudden, he realized the road around him was deserted. That seemed odd; this main artery to Chicago was usually flooded with cars and trucks. Then he saw it. A roadblock of military trucks up

ahead. There must have been twenty trucks blocking his path all the way across the highway. He could see soldiers wielding machine guns and RPGs wherever he looked.

"Well, there is no way I am going to get through that one," he said out loud as if there was someone in the truck that could hear him. He started to slow the big truck, and then he saw it. Beside the highway was one of those ponds that you saw frequently beside the interstates all across the Midwest. Those ponds were where they had gotten the dirt to build the roads and were known to be very deep, some of them over 100 feet. If he was lucky, at least he could make it to the pond and sink the truck. Maybe it would take them too long to find it and the bomb could still do some serious damage.

Jamal mashed the accelerator as he cranked the wheel sharply to the right. With the big tires screeching their complaints, the truck veered sharply into the ditch and up the other side. The big rig busted through the interstate fence like it was a piece of old fabric, went briefly airborne, and then landed with a huge splash right in the middle of the pond.

The Illinois National Guard soldiers looked on helplessly as the truck slowly filled with water and kept settling lower into the pond until it completely disappeared.



Yasin was tired. For a whole day he had fought the back roads of Arkansas, Tennessee, and Virginia as he did his best to dodge the law. He heard from other truck drivers on the CB radio that Atlanta, Georgia, had been completely shut down. Every roadway into the city was blocked by National Guard troops. There was some rumor about another truck bomb headed for Atlanta, and they were doing their best to find it.

Yasin had stopped at a truck stop as soon as he got out of Louisiana and bought some duct tape and a large black magic marker. He then

went to his truck and taped over the name on both sides and wrote a made-up name on the tape. It didn't look very professional, but he had seen it done before, especially if someone bought a used truck and needed to run it temporarily until they could get the name changed.

Now Yasin slowly made his way through Virginia, trying hard not to draw any attention to himself and keeping off the main roads as much as possible. Maybe, just maybe, his plan might work.

Chapter 30

Abdas Hemati checked the computer screen of the laptop once again that was propped up on a rock in his little cave hideout. For two days now he had been carefully monitoring the progress of the American trucks as they slowly made their way across America. He had established a routine of praying, eating some of the food he had brought along, taking a little nap occasionally, and checking the screen. He was pleased to see that all six trucks were on track again, relieved that he had made the right choice to wait when one of the trucks had disappeared for a little while. Abdas broke out in a sweat when he thought about how close he had come to detonating the bombs early. Would Allah still have been pleased with him if his mission had only been partially successful? He checked the time. Only 5 hours now to detonation time. He could see that some of the trucks were already at their destinations and others were getting very close.

He resisted the temptation to call one of his colleagues or a family member to let them know that he was OK. He had taken every precaution he could to not let anyone know where he was, and he knew if he made a phone call someone could pick up the signal and determine his location. He also knew that there were people looking for him that were capable of torturing someone close to him to reveal his whereabouts. So Abdas resigned himself to the boredom of waiting in silence and thinking about what would happen in a few hours when the whole world would know that Iran was the real world superpower. After they had proven to the world in a very real way that they had nuclear weapons, they would be able to hold that threat over any nation they wanted to and make them bend to their demands.

It was a glorious thought to think that in a few hours he will have

broken the will of the American people. Abdas believed that when the American people, what will be left of them, that is, have witnessed the carnage he was about to unleash on them, they wouldn't have the stomach to intervene in what he had planned next. Israel was his next target. To rid the world of every Jew is the calling of every true believer in Islam, and he had a plan to make that happen. The United States had always stood in Islam's way of achieving their goal in the past, but after today, Abdas believed the Great Satan would be too weak and disheartened to intervene in their plans.

Abdas opened the Quran that he had brought with him and began to read from Surah 47.

(47.1) [As for] those who disbelieve and turn away from Allah's way, He shall render their works ineffective.

(47.2) And [as for] those who believe and do good, and believe in what has been revealed to Muhammad, and it is the very truth from their Lord, He will remove their evil from them and improve their condition.

(47.3) That is because those who disbelieve follow falsehood, and have given them their dowries, taking [them] in marriage, not fornicating nor taking them for paramours in secret; and whoever denies faith, his work indeed is of no account, and in the hereafter he shall be one of the losers.

(47.4) So when you meet in battle those who disbelieve, then smite the necks until when you have overcome them, then make [them] prisoners, and afterwards either set them free as a favor or let them ransom [themselves] until the war terminates. That [shall be so]; and if Allah had pleased He would certainly have exacted what is due from them, but that He may try some of you by means of others; and [as for] those who are slain in the way of Allah, He will by no means allow their deeds to perish.

(47.5) He will guide them and improve their condition.

(47.6) And cause them to enter the garden which He has made

known to them.

(47.7) O you who believe ! if you help [the cause of] Allah, He will help you and make firm your feet.

(47.8) And [as for] those who disbelieve, for them is destruction and He has made their deeds ineffective.

Abdas then prayed for the drivers in America that were about to become martyrs for Allah. "Oh, Allah," he petitioned, "I pray that you would grant these martyrs a place in the great garden that you talk about in your Holy Book, and grant us success in our mission to punish the infidels of the world and hasten the soon return of the righteous one, the Mahdi, that he can lead your people, the followers of your prophet Mohammed, to rule the world in peace and harmony."

Abdas laid the Quran respectfully on a rock beside his computer, then he spread his blankets on the rock floor of the cave and laid down for a nap.



Sam Banscott was furious! He couldn't believe that Dirk Pierson had the nerve to double-cross him. Surely Dirk knew that he had just signed his death sentence. It had taken him awhile to get to his destination from Peoria where he had been hiding out with some other members of the jihad group in anticipation of what was about to happen. They had been congratulating themselves on the success of their mission when he had gotten the call from Yasin telling him that Dirk had turned on them. Sam couldn't wait to get his hands on him. A quick death would be way too good for Dirk. He had something much more evil in mind. Sam had learned a lot of nasty tricks of the trade during his days working for the Chicago mob, and he couldn't wait to use some of those tricks on Dirk Pierson.

He finally arrived in Plainfield, Illinois. It was Thursday morning, and the sun was just coming up in an orange ball over the surrounding cornfields. Sam slowly drove his vehicle past the headquarters of

Scott Trucking. He was hoping to be able to get there before Dirk so that he could surprise him, but he noticed that there were several police cruisers sitting in the parking lot so he kept on driving. Sam may not have been the smartest person in the world, but he wasn't a fool either, and going back to prison was not something that he ever intended to do. He would have to devise another plan.

He slowly drove on by and headed east on the next country road. He soon found what he was looking for, a dirt lane that led between two cornfields that farmers used to access their fields. It was late July so the corn was tall on both sides of the lane and easily hid his Chevy Malibu from anyone on the ground. Sam drove to the end of the dirt lane and parked his vehicle, then he started walking south through the corn toward the Scott Trucking lot. It didn't take him long to reach the edge of the lot where he could stay hidden in the corn but could easily see the activities going on around the office. He could even see Dirk through the window sitting at his desk.

Sam noticed that the police officers were changing shifts, and he also noticed two more news vans pulling up, adding to the two that were already there. He sat down cross-legged on the ground and made himself comfortable three rows into the corn where he could easily see out but was pretty sure he couldn't be seen. He was like a cat waiting for its prey. When the right time came he would pounce.



Dirk Pierson was exhausted. He hadn't gone home since Tuesday morning and now the sun was coming up on Thursday morning. There were only a few hours left before explosion time. One truck was still missing. The other four had been quickly brought down after Mike Pence got the fake tracking system working to fool the terrorists. Justin had called in military satellite signal jammers that were following all the trucks to the nuclear test site in Nevada where they could be put underground and safely destroyed. Dirk just hoped and prayed

that the jammers worked to block the satellite phone signal from the terrorists.

Prayed? Yes, he found himself doing that a lot the last few days which seemed kind of funny to him. He had never really prayed before and now he found himself praying almost constantly. He couldn't really understand it, but somehow, it gave him so much peace, something he had had very little of in his lifetime.

Dirk heard the front door open and close and light footsteps walking down the hallway toward his office. He looked up from his desk to see Megyn Rogers standing in the doorway. Dirk rubbed his sleepy eyes to make sure he wasn't hallucinating, but there she was, long blond hair, brown eyes, and she was wearing blue jeans and an orange fighting Illini T-shirt.

"Good morning, Dirk," Megyn said softly.

"Well, good morning, Megyn. What in the world are you doing here?" Dirk sounded surprised because he was.

"I thought you might be hungry so I brought you some breakfast." Megyn set a McDonald's bag on his desk which Dirk hadn't even noticed that she was carrying.

"Well, that's mighty sweet of you. Thanks. As a matter of fact, I am hungry. Here, have a seat." Dirk got up and grabbed a folding chair that was leaning against the wall and unfolded it for her.

"I saw on the news what was going on. Oh, it's horrible, isn't it? And then I talked to Will last night when he stopped by the convenience store and he told me you haven't left your spot and weren't planning to until this was over."

"I feel a tremendous responsibility to help as much as I can to bring this to a happy ending. I am totally appalled for the part I played in this. I was so stupid, so blind, but now everything seems different. I feel like I know the truth now." Dirk's emotions finally let go, partly because the fatigue of the past few days was taking over and partly because of the remorse he was feeling. He didn't understand what was

hitting him; he had never felt this way before. He turned his head away from Megyn and started sobbing uncontrollably.

Megyn came around the desk and put her arms around Dirk. "Will told me about your encounter with Jesus. That is so awesome. I'm so proud of you for being willing to stand up and do what's right."

Dirk was totally taken by surprise by Megyn's display of affection, but he had to admit he really enjoyed it. Her softness and the sweet smell of her perfume were tantalizing to his senses. When Dirk could finally get control of himself he whispered, "Why don't you hate me for what I've done?"

"Hate you? How could I hate you? God forgives you, and so do I. The Bible says that if we confess our sins he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. That means you are forgiven, and if God forgives you, then so do I. I'm just glad you came to see the truth before it was too late."

Dirk took a napkin from the McDonald's bag and wiped his face. "But, Megyn, I don't know if I have even confessed my sins. This is all so new to me. How do I know that God has forgiven me?"

"Trust me, you wouldn't be this emotional about it if you weren't sorry for what you've done," Megyn replied. "God sees the heart. He knows what is really there, and I believe he sees in your heart what I see—a real sincere person who wants to do what is right and do whatever he can to make restitution for what he has done. Now, you had better eat your McMuffin before it gets stone cold."

"Thank you so much, Megyn, for the breakfast and for being a friend. When this is all over, can I call you, maybe go out to dinner or something?"

Megyn flashed him a big smile "Sure, here's my number," she said as she scribbled her number on a piece of scratch paper on Dirk's desk. She picked up her purse and turned and headed for the door.

"Thanks again, Megyn," Dirk said.

"No problem. Have a better day, and try to get some sleep. You

look awful," Megyn said over her shoulder as she disappeared down the hallway.



From his hiding place in the cornfield Sam Banskotti had witnessed the whole exchange between Dirk and Megyn. Although he couldn't hear what was being said he could see by their actions that the blond woman was someone that Dirk cared about.

Suddenly a plan formed in his mind. He knew how he could inflict some serious pain on Dirk Pierson.

Sam saw that Megyn had stopped to chat with Patricia in the driver's lounge. This might give him just enough time to do what he needed to do. Because of all the news vehicles and police cars in the parking lot, Megyn had parked on the grass close to the cornfield where he was hiding. He just had to make his way about a hundred yards to the left to be right next to her car.

As Megyn approached her car she looked down to retrieve the car keys from her purse. Suddenly, she felt two strong arms grab her from behind. One hand clamped over her mouth and the other arm encircled her waist and picked her up off of the ground and carried her into the cornfield.

Megyn kicked and flailed her arms, but Sam was too strong for her. He carried her through the corn until they were far enough from the office that he could safely put her down.

"Who are you, and what do you want?" she said as she sized up her assailant. She saw a tall Italian man with black hair, dark eyes, and a face that could have been handsome had it not been for the menacing look of hatred that manifested itself in a scowl.

"Never mind who I am," he said, "it's what I want that matters. I want your friend Dirk, and you are going to help me get him. Now you can choose to cooperate and we'll get along just fine, or you can make it hard and get hurt."

“OK, so what do you want me to do?” Megyn asked skeptically.

“Just walk. I have a car waiting on the other side of this field.” Sam pushed her along holding her arm in an iron grip.

When they reached the car Sam released his grip for a second as he reached into his pocket for the keys. That was all Megyn needed. She bolted for the cornfield running as fast as she could, the sharp edges of the corn leaves cutting her face and arms as she ran.

Sam cursed as he sprinted off after her. Megyn's short legs were no match for the lanky Italian. He tackled her as if she were a football quarterback heading for a touchdown. They rolled in the dirt with arms and legs flailing in every direction. Sam's superior strength finally subdued her, and he lifted her to her feet. Savagely, he bent her arms behind her back and pushed her back toward the car. “Let's try this again, young lady. If you try to run this time, I'll just shoot you,” he snarled.

When they reached the car Sam retrieved a roll of duct tape from the trunk and proceeded to wrap her wrists and feet with it. He put another piece over her mouth before dumping her into the trunk and speeding down the dirt road.

Chapter 31

Patricia Scott was on the phone once again with Justin Powell. “We have taken four trucks down,” Justin was saying. “One of the trucks tried to run our roadblock and wound up crashing into a concrete pillar at about a hundred miles per hour. Needless to say, the driver’s dead and the whole county smells like coffee.

“The next driver tried to shoot his way out and killed two cops and injured a third before he was brought down.

“The third was surprised in the shower and was arrested without incident.

“The fourth was only a few miles from here, close to Bloomington. He decided that it would be better to sink his truck into a borrow pit than to face the military roadblock we had set up for him. They are still working on retrieving that bomb from the bottom of the pit as we speak. There is still no sign of the last truck, the one that was supposedly heading for Atlanta. Any ideas?”

“I don’t know. I’ll talk to Dirk about that and see if he has any ideas where he might have gone. Man, a truck can’t just disappear. So now what? What are you going to do with the bombs that you have captured?”

“Well, it’s pretty obvious they can’t be easily disarmed so the military is picking them up and taking them to their nuclear test site in Nevada.”

“That’s not good enough. Those bombs are going to go off at 10:00 this morning no matter where they are. We need some way to block the satellite signal to those bombs. I’ll bet the military has jammers that can block that signal. We need one close enough to each bomb to block the signal until they can safely be put underground and detonated.”

"That's already done. We have military jammers on all four bombs now."

Justin hung up and Patricia stood and entered Dirk's office. "How are you holding up, Dirk?" she asked.

"Oh, I'm OK, I guess. I'm ready for this mess to be over."

"Well, I've got some good news and some bad news. First, the good news. Four of the bombs have been captured. The bad news is we can't find Yasin. He seems to have disappeared off the face of the earth. What can you tell me about this Yasin guy?"

"To be honest with you, I have only met him a few times. There are a lot of our drivers that I hardly ever see. I talk to them on the phone frequently though. Yasin always seemed pretty quiet. I would say above average intelligence, but he never said much. His paperwork was always in order and very neatly done."

"So do you think this is the kind of driver that could think for himself?"

"Yes, I would say so. He was always able to deliver his loads on time and never caused a problem about anything."

Patricia thought about that for a minute, and then continued. "So put yourself in his shoes, Dirk. If you were driving that truck and you knew that you had been discovered, what would you do?"

Dirk tried to get his tired brain to focus. It was obvious Yasin had somehow disabled the satellite transponder so that they couldn't track him. Which meant he was probably smart enough to figure out that they knew his destination, so the obvious conclusion would be that he would take a different route and head to a different city. To Patricia he said, "Yasin isn't going to Atlanta. He has picked another target. He is heading to a different city. He could be anywhere by now."

"Great! So now what? If we put out a nationwide APB, we'll have the whole country in panic. We already have Memphis destroyed and Atlanta is in chaos." But Patricia knew they had no choice. They could not risk not finding that truck. The consequences of another bomb

going off were just more than she could bear to think about.

Patricia stuck her head into Will's office. "Will, would you join me to make a statement to the media?"

Will looked up with tired eyes from his computer screen where he had been browsing the news wires for any news he could find about the terrorist attack. The news reports coming from Memphis were devastating. There were some aerial photos of the devastation showing a one-mile circle of before and after pictures. Where there were buildings before, now there was nothing but dirt. Everything in that circle had been incinerated in a millisecond. In a larger circle going out another two miles in every direction it looked like a huge tornado had blasted the area. Trees were stripped of their leaves, some homes were completely destroyed and others just sustained some damage. There were hundreds of fires raging out of control because fire crews couldn't get there due to the radiation hazard. In some of the video images, people could be seen wandering the streets. Some with burn injuries, others seemingly unhurt but with a dazed and hopeless look on their faces as they tried to comprehend what had happened to them.

The scenes reminded Will of a war zone, but it was far worse than any war zone he had ever seen, and war zones were always in some far-off place on the other side of the world, not in America. It was hard for him to comprehend that this was happening to America and not only that, but that he found himself in the middle of it. The nagging question in the back of his mind was, would Scott Trucking be blamed for this? Would he somehow be held responsible for this? Will vowed to do whatever he could to help catch whoever was behind these terrorists and bring them to justice.

"Will, did you hear me?" Patricia raised her voice a bit. "I need you to stand with me and meet these reporters."

Will took another sip of coffee and stood. "Sure, babe, but I'm not sure what we're going to say."

"You just stand with me, and I'll do the talking."

They made their way to the front door of Scott Trucking where an increasingly large number of reporters were gathering. As soon as Will opened the door they were bombarded with questions. Will held up his hands and signaled for silence, then in the most authoritative voice he could muster he said, "Hold your questions. Patricia Scott from the Department of Homeland Security will make a statement."

Patricia walked up to the makeshift podium that had been set up with numerous microphones. She looked around at the array of cameras that were pointing in her direction. It seemed that every news organization in the country was represented there. Patricia tried not to think about the fact that millions of people all over the world would be watching her live. The weight of what she knew she had to do was tremendous on her shoulders, but she knew it had to be done.

"Hello, America," she started. "I am asking for your help today. We now know that there were six trucks that were used by terrorists to transport nuclear bombs to six American cities. These bombs are designed to be detonated remotely by someone who we believe is in a foreign country. Four of those trucks along with their bombs have been captured. The fifth bomb tragically detonated near Memphis, Tennessee, as I am sure you are all aware of. That leaves one more bomb that is still out there somewhere, unaccounted for.

"We know that the truck carrying the last bomb was scheduled to attack Atlanta, Georgia, but we now have reason to believe the driver has targeted a different city. What we don't know is which city. The truth is he could be almost anywhere in this vast nation by now and that is why we need your help. We need you to keep your eyes open for a white, late-model Kenworth truck from Scott Trucking. The license number is RY3945. It will look similar to the truck you see behind me. If you see this truck, call 911 immediately. Do not go near the truck or try to engage the driver. This man is a suicide bomber and extremely dangerous. I repeat, do not try to engage this driver in any way. He is extremely dangerous. That is all I have at this time and thank you for

your help.”

Immediately the reporters starting firing questions all at once. It sounded like a cacophony of noise, and none of the questions made any sense. Patricia held up her hand. “One at a time. I’ll take a few questions.” Then she pointed to a young reporter in the front from the *Chicago Sun Times*. “You, what is your question?”

“How long have you known about these terrorist attacks?”

“We have been following snippets of evidence for a few weeks, but we really didn’t know anything for certain until yesterday.” Patricia scanned the crowd who all had their hands in the air. She picked out a CNN reporter. “You, sir, what is your question?”

“We notice that your last name is Scott. Is there any relation between you and Scott Trucking?”

Patricia smiled. “Yes, there is. You see this handsome man here beside me? This is Will Scott, the owner of Scott Trucking, and also my husband.”

“Is there a reason the terrorists targeted Scott Trucking? Did it have anything to do with you working for DHS?” the reporter persisted.

Patricia was stunned by that question. She hadn’t taken the time to think about that. Her mind was racing for an answer. Was there some connection? Some flash from the past that made the terrorists target her and her husband’s business? She didn’t have time in this split second before she answered the question to come up with a good answer so she just said the first thing that came to her mind. “We believe the terrorists chose Scott Trucking because of their good track record. They knew no one would ever suspect this company and also the fact that their trucks regularly hauled loads of coffee out of Texas. As for the terrorists targeting me, I have no idea why they would do that. I believe it was just a coincidence. Now I must get back to work and stop these people.”

Chapter 32

Yasin came out of the shower of the little truck stop he had found. One of the disadvantages of traveling back roads was that he missed all the major truck stops with their nice clean showers. This truck stop was anything but clean, but it had to do. He was lucky that it even had a shower. He had taken his ritualistic shower and put on his traditional Arab garments.

Yasin had carefully parked his truck in the back of the lot where it would be hard to spot by the casual looker. He stuffed his dirty clothes into his duffel bag and headed out of the shower room. To exit the truck stop he had to go through the driver's lounge. This lounge consisted of a couch and a couple of recliners where drivers could relax while they waited for loads or just wasted some time until they had accumulated enough off hours so they could drive again. It seemed that was the life of a truck driver, either in a hurry to meet a deadline or sitting around waiting. Today there were two drivers in the lounge watching the little TV on a stand in the corner. The driver sitting on the couch looked like a big burley Harley biker wearing a leather vest with a skull and crossbones patch on his left shoulder. He had a big bushy grey beard and a do-rag on his head. Yasin estimated he probably weighed about 250 pounds.

The other man was sitting in a recliner with his feet up on the footrest. He was so big and fat that it looked like the recliner could barely hold him. He was wearing a baseball cap with a DH Express logo on it. Fat Boy had a can of Mountain Dew in one hand, and with the other he kept reaching into a huge bag of potato chips that was pinched between his legs and bringing fistfuls of chips up to his mouth and crunching like he hadn't had anything to eat for a week. Yasin wanted

to puke at the sight of the fat slob but something on the TV caught his attention. Fox News was playing the footage of the press conference that Patricia Scott had given a few minutes before.

“Can you believe this?” Biker Dude exclaimed. “Those crazy Muslims! Man, I wish I could get my hands on one of those guys! What would make a person want to blow himself up like that? That’s just nuts!”

“Yeah, I know,” Fat Boy said. “Where do you think that last truck is headed?”

“I don’t know, but if I see him, I’ll run his ass off the road.”

At that moment, the news anchor said, “We just received this photo of the driver of the truck that DHS has asked everyone to be on the lookout for.”

Yasin tensed as he saw his own face flash across the screen. He looked at the other drivers and saw that he had immediately been recognized. Biker Dude was reaching under his vest for what Yasin assumed was a gun. Yasin flew into action and reached behind his back and pulled his knife from the holster that he always wore Crocodile Dundee-style and with one fluid motion, sailed the knife across the room where it split Biker Dude’s beard and embedded itself deep into his neck.

Fat Boy’s eyes were as big as saucers as he tried to disentangle his huge body from the recliner. Yasin calmly retrieved his knife from Biker Dude’s throat and walked the two steps to Fat Boy’s chair and in one swift motion, slit his throat. He quickly rummaged through Fat Boy’s pockets and found his keys, grabbed his duffel bag, and calmly left the building.

Yasin’s eyes scanned the parking lot until they landed on a DH Express truck parked five spaces from his own. He used the keys he had just stolen from Fat Boy and let himself into the truck. Within minutes he switched trailers with his own truck which he parked out of sight behind some trees and hit the road with the DH Express truck

and his trailer loaded with its cargo of death.

Yasin was barely out of the parking lot heading north on Route 1 before he met police cars and an ambulance with sirens blaring heading the opposite direction. Apparently someone had discovered the bodies in the driver's lounge. Yasin knew it was just a matter of time until someone connected the dots and realized what had happened, but hopefully he had bought himself enough time to reach his destination. He decided to switch tactics because now he knew the police would be looking for him on secondary roads so at the next opportunity he took a left to I-95 where he could put more miles behind himself and the bloody truck stop.

Chapter 33

Brian Williston had been watching the home of Abdas Hemati in Tehran for days. There had been no sign of him. Brian finally broke into the house thinking maybe he had moved without the CIA finding it out but everything was in its place. Abdas apparently was a very neat, detail-oriented person. His house was immaculate; nothing out of place, but it was obvious he hadn't been there in a while. There were no dirty dishes, and the one lonely plant by the front window was drooping from lack of water.

Brian's training as a CIA operative had taught him to read people by their surroundings, and what he could see from how Abdas lived told him that he was dealing with someone who paid attention to detail. This was a man who would not be easy to catch if he knew he was being hunted. Brian studied a picture on the fireplace mantle. The picture was of Abdas and a couple on a ski slope. He assumed the couple was Hemati's parents. Brian also knew there was only one way to get to a man like Abdas. He would have to go through the people closest to him.

Brian called the one person who he knew had studied this man more than anyone else. Patricia Scott.

"Hello, Brian," Patricia said, answering her phone. "I hope you have some good news for me."

"Well, not really," Brian replied. "I'm in Abdas Hemati's house now, and it's obvious he hasn't been here for a while. What can you tell me about his parents? I think I'm looking at a picture of them."

"Well, I know they are wealthy enough that they live in a nice house on the edge of Tehran. They both work for the government in some capacity, although we're not sure what." Patricia gave Brian their

address and instructed him to go “lean” on them for some information about their son.

“You realize this is going to blow my cover wide open. I’m going to need extradition out of this country and fast.”

“Yes, I do realize that, but this is of utmost importance to bring this man down now before he tries to blow these bombs. As soon as your mission is accomplished, use your other ID and get out of the country as fast as possible.”

“OK, I’m on my way,” Brian said as he headed for the door.

As Brian quietly exited the back door of Hemati’s house he suddenly felt a searing pain ripping through his chest, then he heard the report of a sniper rifle. With all the strength he had, he lifted his head to look up the mountain in time to see his assailant step out from behind a tree and suddenly realized the house must have been watched. Brian’s world started to go black as he remembered what his instructor had tried to drill into their heads during training. *In this business, the smallest mistake could prove to be fatal*, and today, he had made one, and he was paying for it with his life.

Chapter 34

Patricia returned to her makeshift workstation in the break room of Scott Trucking. She checked her computer for any updates from Justin or Mike. Seeing there was nothing she turned to the TV where they were still giving updates about the Memphis explosion. Over the last few hours it had become obvious this had been a nuclear explosion. No one was allowed to go near the scene because of high levels of radiation.

The pictures coming across the screen now were from a high-flying airplane showing a wide area of devastation. The center of the blast showed nothing but bare dirt where everything was vaporized. A bit further out, hundreds of fires could be seen that had been ignited by the intense thermal radiation.

Now the camera zoomed in to the center of Memphis where people could be seen wandering the streets. Many of them had severe burns on their bodies from the radiation. It was a horrible scene of destruction and devastation.

Patricia was spellbound by the images on the screen. Visions of the horror of 9/11 came flooding into her mind. She felt paralyzed, unable to think, unable to focus. Somehow, she had to pull it together, keep moving, keep thinking. What was their next step? Where was that last truck? They had to find it. Yasin, who she had talked to on the phone earlier, was driving the truck so he knew that they knew what they were planning. Obviously he had taken a different route since the authorities hadn't been able to locate him around Atlanta. But where? Where would he go? Patricia went over to the huge map of the United States on the break room wall.

"Yasin, where are you?" she muttered to herself. She closed her

eyes and leaned against the wall. She was so tired. It seemed like days since she had slept. But she had to think, think like a terrorist. *OK, Patricia, if you were a terrorist what would you do? Where would you go? Hit the biggest target possible* was the only answer she could think of.

Patricia called Justin on his direct line.

"Justin," he answered impatiently.

"Yasin is heading to Washington, D.C.," Patricia said through clenched teeth.

"How do you know that?"

"Because I know how these people think. They always want to do the most damage possible. That's why they send suicide bombers into the most crowded places they can find. He knows Atlanta is out of the question."

"But there are a lot of big cities between Atlanta and Washington. He could hit any one of those cities. Does he even have time to make it to Washington before detonation time?"

"Justin, listen to me. This guy is no dummy, and he has probably been listening to the radio and knows we have captured the other four trucks. He knows he is the only one left, and he wants to do the most damage possible, and the best way to do that is to take out our government. It has to be Washington."

"So what do you think we should do now?"

"Call Washington and shut down every highway going into that city. Get every chopper in the air they can find. We have to find that truck, and we have to find it soon!"

"What if he shows up in Charlotte or Greensboro? Do you realize how stupid we're going to look?" Justin was hesitating out of fear of being wrong.

"Yes, I do, and I also realize how many dead people there will be if we don't stop this guy."

"Do you have any physical evidence to prove your point or is it just another feeling?"

Patricia was getting frustrated. She could feel her blood pressure starting to rise and knew the veins in her neck were protruding like they always did when she got angry. She forced herself to lower her voice. "My advice is based on a gut feeling that is backed up with the fact that I have been hunting these people for a long time and I know how they think. Now make the call!"

Patricia hung up the phone and stared at the map. Will he make the call or won't he? She had no idea.

Justin stared at the phone in his hand in disbelief. She had the nerve to tell him what to do—and then hang up on him. He started to call her back but then stopped. Patricia was one of his best agents and was usually right. What if she was right and he didn't take action? If the media got hold of that one, his career would be over. If he was going to make a mistake, it had better be on the side of caution rather than on the side of irresponsibility.

Justin dialed the cell phone number of Julie Bails, the director of DHS.

"Hello, this is Julie," she answered.

"Julie, this is Justin Powell from Chicago. We spoke earlier."

"Yes, Justin, I hope you have some good news for me. This thing in Memphis looks awful. Please tell me you have found all the other bombs and disarmed them."

"Well, almost. I've got good news and bad news. First, the good news. We have four of the bombs in custody now. The bad news, there is still one bomb out there, and we have reason to believe that it's headed toward Washington, D.C., as we speak. We believe you should take actions now to shut down all highways into the city."

"You say you have reason to believe. What are you basing your reasoning on?"

Justin hesitated. "I guess just a hunch, ma'am. The terrorist driving this truck will want to position himself to do the maximum damage, and we believe that is Washington."

“Let me get this straight. You want me to shut down Washington because you have a hunch?”

“With all due respect, ma’am, it is a hunch that is based on the knowledge of how these guys think.”

“Have you seen what is happening in Atlanta? There is panic in the streets. People are running over each other trying to get out of town. Many people will die in Atlanta today, bomb or no bomb. Now you want me to set off the same thing in Washington on someone’s *hunch*? I don’t think so.”

“Is the president in a safe location?”

“Yes, he is, and I am with him. Of course I can’t tell you where that location is, but just know we’re safe.”

“Well, just for the record, you have been warned. Whatever happens now is in your hands. Oh, and just so you know, this conversation has been recorded.”

“Why would you do that? What’s going on? Don’t you trust me?”

“Just a little insurance. I find it kind of interesting that a lot of the inner circle around the president *just happen* to be out of town today.”

“What in the world is that supposed to mean?”

“Oh, nothing really. Like I said, just a little insurance.”

Justin hung up the phone. He quickly grabbed two flash drives and loaded a copy of their conversation on both. He put one in his pocket and put the other in a plain envelope and strategically placed it under some papers on Patricia’s desk as he made his way past her office and left the building.

Chapter 35

Julie Bails turned to the president. "Our plan still may work. I believe everything is going to work out in our favor. There is just one little problem in Chicago that we need to take care of."

"What kind of problem?" the president asked as he turned from the monitor he was watching. The Operations Room on Air Force One was amazing. There were live feeds from every news organization, plus the Pentagon and several intelligence agencies from around the world.

President John Blackwood loved the feeling of power and control he felt when he was in the Operations Room. From this point he could command the greatest military the world had ever known to strike anywhere in the world. For most men, this would have been a humbling experience when they realized the immense responsibility the position held, but for John Blackwood, the knowledge of his immense power just fed his already overinflated ego.

"It seems our man in Chicago is getting close to the truth," Julie replied.

"That is what we have Special Ops teams for. I'm sure you know who to call to get our 'little problem' taken care of."

"Yes, of course." Julie dialed a number from her cell phone to someone in Chicago.

"Hello," a gruff voice answered.

"There is a Justin Powell that needs to be eliminated." Julie gave the man the details, work address, and home address. "He's probably leaving the office now. I'll upload a picture to your phone. And please make it clean."

"Got it," Mr. GruffVoice replied.

Chapter 36

Justin Powell found it hard to wrap his mind around what he had suddenly come to realize. He had long had suspicions about the current administration in Washington, D.C. But he never dreamt they would stoop to the level that he was suspicious they were stooping to.

He had long thought the leaders of America were making some pretty dumb mistakes. When it came to the economy, it seemed like everything they did hurt the economy instead of helped it. The glossy politicians always had someone else to blame; it was never their fault. In the war on terror, it seemed like they were helping the enemy more than fighting them. They even refused to call it a war anymore, but referred to it as an “overseas contingency operation.”

Then there were the operations in Libya, Egypt, Syria, and Yemen, and other countries around the world. Who even knew which side we were on anymore?

Justin also couldn't understand why the State Department was giving millions of taxpayer dollars to the Palestinians, an avowed enemy to our only ally in the Middle East, Israel. He had always just chalked it up to incompetence. He had always thought these people didn't really know what they were doing and was just hoping the country could make it to the next election. Maybe things would change for the better. Suddenly he realized these people knew exactly what they were doing. This terrorist plot was part of something much bigger. If that was true, then he also realized that his life was in some serious danger.

Justin poked his head into Mike Pence's office. “Mike, is that truck-tracker fake program still running?”

Mike looked up from his computer screen. “Yes, sir, it is. We are just 30 minutes from ‘D’ time, and all six trucks are right on schedule.”

“‘D’ time?”

“Detonation time.”

“Oh, I see. I’m leaving the office. Call my cell if anything new develops.”

“Are you sick or something? You look kind of pale.”

“I just realized something, and I really need to get out of here for a while.”

“Yeah, it really sucks that we haven’t found that other truck yet. This could be really bad.”

“Yes, it could, but that’s not what’s bothering me.”

“What could possibly be worse than another nuclear explosion in one of our cities?”

“Believe me, if I told you what I’m suspicious of you wouldn’t believe it, so just trust me when I say it is going to get a lot worse.”

Justin left the building carrying his laptop and a box full of files. He called Patricia as soon as he got on the road. “I am heading your way,” he told her.

“Why?” she asked. “Do you realize what time it is and we still haven’t found Yasin?”

“I just can’t work in the office anymore. I’ll explain it to you later.”

“OK, this should be interesting.” Patricia saw another yellow banner cross the TV screen signaling a news alert. The anchor came on showing a picture of a Scott Trucking truck. “Justin, there’s another news alert coming on! I’ll call you back.”

The news reporter was saying, “We are at the scene of a double homicide that happened earlier today at this little truck stop in Virginia. This truck stop is off the beaten path on one of the back roads of Virginia. Two men were discovered stabbed to death in the driver’s lounge earlier today. Now the authorities have discovered this truck.” The screen flashed to the Scott Trucking truck. “This truck was found abandoned behind some trees. The name had been covered up with some duct tape to disguise the identity of this truck.

"Authorities believe this truck was part of the plot to deliver nuclear bombs to cities around the country. This particular truck had been believed to be heading for Atlanta, but now we find the truck way up here in Virginia. No word yet on where the trailer with its deadly payload is though. There has been some speculation that the driver may have dropped the trailer somewhere. The trailer will be harder to spot because there are no identifying marks on it. The trailer looks like millions of other trailers just like it.

"We are calling for everyone in this area to report any trailer that may seem out of place to the authorities."

The anchor came back on and asked the news guy a question. "Why would this guy drop his trailer?"

"There has been some speculation that maybe he had second thoughts. Maybe he decided he didn't want to commit suicide after all. Maybe he decided to park the trailer in the middle of the country where it wouldn't harm as many people. The bottom line is we just don't know, but we do know the trailer is not at this truck stop."

The screen showed a picture of Yasin as the news anchor encouraged people to call the number on the screen if they had any information about him or the trailer.

Patricia called Justin. "Are you listening to the news?"

"Yes, I got it. What do you think?"

"I think he stole a truck, and he's headed into D.C. right now. Did Julie shut the city down?"

"I don't think so."

"What do you mean you don't think so?"

"I really can't talk right now. My phone is probably bugged. I'll talk to you when I get there." He hung up.

Justin turned onto Highway 59 South toward Plainfield. He drove for five miles . . . and then he saw it. A black chopper off to his left. How did they find him so fast? Probably tracked his phone. He rolled down his window and chucked his phone into the ditch, hit the brakes,

and did a sliding spin, heading the opposite direction. He had to get into traffic. Surely they wouldn't take him out in heavy traffic. He saw the side door of the chopper open and a guy sitting there with an RPG on his shoulder, aiming it directly at him."

Justin couldn't believe what was happening. After spending his whole life serving his country, this was the thanks he got. Just one disagreement with this administration and they were going to murder him for it?

Justin saw a puff of smoke as the RPG guy pulled the trigger. He slammed on the brakes but before the brake pads could grip the discs, his new Cadillac erupted in a horrendous explosion.



Patricia Scott turned to Will. "We still have media people outside, don't we?"

"Yes, and they have been begging to talk to you."

"Well, let's go talk."

They walked out the front door of Scott Trucking where they were attacked by a mob of media. Will raised his hand. "Hold on, Patricia is ready to make a statement."

Patricia made her way to the makeshift podium. All the media trained their cameras on her. "This has been a tragic day for America," she began. "As you are aware there is one bomb that has not been accounted for. The truck that was transporting that bomb has been found in Virginia. I think that driver has stolen a truck and is using it to deliver the bomb to its destination, which I now believe is Washington, D.C. I believe the officials of Washington should shut down every incoming road, especially from the south and west. If you are watching this program from Washington you should make your way out of the city. May God have mercy on us all."

A reporter asked, "Why are you so certain that this truck is headed to Washington?"

“Several reasons. Number one, this man will want to inflict as much damage as possible. Number two, given his most recent known location, it puts him within easy reach of Washington.”

“So are you saying you don’t believe the last report that he may have had second thoughts and dropped his trailer in some remote location?” another reporter asked.

“That is highly unlikely. When a person has come as far as Yasin has toward his goal, it is quite doubtful that he will give it up.”

“Do you believe that these are Muslim extremists that are doing this?”

“Yes, definitely.”

“How can you be so sure? Isn’t that profiling? Couldn’t it just as easily be Christian extremists?”

Patricia looked at the reporter that had posed the question. A young, curly-haired man with geeky glasses. Probably one of those Harvard types that was educated way beyond his intelligence.

“Let’s get something straight here. Christians don’t teach hate to their children. They teach love and respect. I have studied these people for a long time and to lump the Muslim and the Christian faith together is just ridiculous. They are polar opposites.”

“Are you a Christian?” Geeky Glasses Dude asked.

“Yes, I am,” Patricia answered without hesitation.

“So your opinion is probably biased.”

“Of course it’s biased, and so is yours, now if you’ll excuse me, I have work to do.” Patricia turned and entered the building as the crowd of reporters yelled more questions at her.

“Wow, that was gutsy. Baby, you did good,” Will said as he gave her a big hug.

“Those leftist liberals make me so mad! They have no common sense at all. Can you believe that guy? ‘Your opinion is probably biased!’ I should have said, ‘Of course it is—it’s biased with the truth, and you should try it sometime. But I don’t know if your little pea

brain could handle the truth; probably make it explode or melt down like a nuclear reactor out of control.”

“Wow! Good thing you didn’t tell him what you really thought,” Will chuckled.

“Next time I just might,” Patricia fumed. “Now, let’s get back to work.”

Patricia picked up her phone and dialed Justin’s number. No answer. Voice mail.

Chapter 37

Yasin could see Washington, D.C., in front of him. He checked his watch. It was 9:40 A.M. He had 20 minutes to reach his destination. Just 20 minutes of life left.

He steered the big DH Express rig up I-395, then took Exit 1 and headed north on Route 1. He noticed the southbound side was jammed up with traffic. He saw squad cars with their lights flashing and sirens blaring, trying to make their way through the mess, heading south.

Yasin watched in his mirror as they set up a roadblock behind him. He laughed and said out loud to no one in particular, "Allah must be watching over me. I just made that by the skin of my teeth. They must have discovered Biker Dude and Fat Boy and figured out where I was heading. Sorry, folks, it's too late. The ship has sailed, or as you stupid Americans say, the fat lady is about to sing."

He was closing in on Constitution Avenue. Yasin checked his watch and slowed the truck. He made a wide swinging right turn onto Constitution Avenue, down the street that contained so much history of the United States. First, he passed the Museum of Natural History, the place where all the greatest science in the world was on display. Children shrank in terror or looked in awe at the giant dinosaurs. People marveled at the wonders of nature they saw in the IMAX Theater. Tourists from around the world were nonchalantly going in and out of the doors.

Next, Yasin rolled slowly past the historic sights of the National Mall. He came to Pennsylvania Avenue, turned right, and then left back onto Constitution Avenue Northwest. He could see the United States Capital Building just ahead on his right. He was within a few blocks.

Close enough. He looked at his watch. Five minutes. He slowed the truck as much as he dared without drawing too much attention.

Yasin's mind was racing. Job accomplished, praise be to Allah. Shortly, he would have his reward, 72 black-eyed virgins. Eternal bliss. What could possibly be better than that?

But there was something else. What was that, a doubt? What if? What if his teachers had been wrong? What if they had deliberately deceived him? What if there were no virgins? What if they only used that story for motivation? In fact, now that he thought about it, he never saw his teachers choosing the path of the martyr. Why not? Too many questions, not enough answers.

Yasin couldn't understand what was happening. He had never had thoughts like this before. What if he had been deceived? What if the Christians were right after all?

Yasin found a spot and pulled over to the side of the street and killed the engine. He would pretend to be broke down.

For the first time he looked around the cab of the stolen truck. It was a mess. Fat Boy obviously liked to eat. There were empty fast-food bags and containers piled up between the seats. Then he saw a little pamphlet on the dash. He picked it up and started to read, "Steps to Peace with God," by Billy Graham.

Yasin opened the pamphlet and read "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life" John 3:16.

Then he read about our sin problem and how that sin separates us from God. "For all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God . . . the wages of sin is death" Romans 3:23; 6:23.

Then he read the remedy, the cross. "But God demonstrates his love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us" Romans 5:8.

"Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved" Acts 4:12.

“God is on one side and all people on the other side, and Christ Jesus, himself man, is between them to bring them together” 1 Timothy 2:5.

Yasin thought about that for a minute. If that is true and the Bible teaches that the only way to God is through Jesus Christ, where does that leave him? He read on. “Our response, receive Christ. All prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him [Jesus Christ] receives forgiveness of sins through his name” Acts 10:43.

“Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God” John 1:12.

Yasin suddenly felt emotions come over him that he had never felt before. Remorse. Sorrow. Pain in his soul. Anguish. He didn’t understand what was happening, but the Holy Spirit was speaking to his soul.

He read on about how to receive Christ:

1. Admit your need (I am a sinner).
2. Be willing to turn from your sins (repent).
3. Believe that Jesus Christ died for you on the cross and rose from the grave.
4. Through prayer, invite Jesus to come into your life through the Holy Spirit. (Receive him as your Savior.)

By this time Yasin was sobbing uncontrollably. How had he missed it? How had his people been so deceived? Suddenly it was so clear to him, but now it was too late. The die had been cast, the mold had been set, his fate had been sealed.

Yasin read the prayer in the pamphlet as if it was his own. From the depths of his soul he read aloud between sobs. “Dear Lord Jesus, I know that I am sinful, and I need your forgiveness. I believe that you died to pay the penalty for my sin. I want to turn from my sin nature and follow you instead. I invite you to come into my heart and life. In Jesus’ name, amen.”

Yasin suddenly felt a peace overtake his soul like he had never felt

before. For a moment he forgot where he was. Then suddenly he remembered the mission, the bomb, Washington, jihad. He immediately knew what he had to do. He hit the key and the big engine roared to life. Yasin jammed the big transmission into gear and popped the clutch as he floored the accelerator. He blasted the powerful air horn as he rammed through the gears. Everything seemed to move in slow motion. He saw a lady walking her dog on the sidewalk. Two teenagers in the car beside him singing with the radio at the top of their lungs. A man in a suit and tie hurriedly crossing the street, probably late for a meeting. Clear blue sunny sky, not a cloud in sight. Tourists driving too slow while they gawked at all the sights.

Yasin realized he didn't hate these people anymore. Something was different. God had changed him.

Then he felt it. For a split second he felt heat like he had never felt before, and then total light as Jesus welcomed him into heaven.

Chapter 38

Abdas Hemati started packing up his gear. He couldn't believe his good fortune. The plan had gone even better than he had hoped. According to trucktracker, all the trucks had made it to their destination. He couldn't wait to get back to civilization so he could watch the news and see what the world reaction would be.

He had taken great delight in sending the text message at exactly 10 A.M. Eastern Time that he knew would change the world. One message sent to six receivers that had the potential to kill millions of people. Somehow being this far away he really didn't think about the carnage. To him, it was just a tactical act of war, just a small move in a bigger game.

Abdas gathered his gear into a backpack and walked back to his vehicle. As soon as he entered the outskirts of Tehran he could see that they had received the news. People were dancing in the streets shouting, "Death to America! Death to America!"

Abdas felt an extreme sense of satisfaction. His lifelong dream was finally coming to pass. But there was still an emptiness inside that he just couldn't understand. What was this that he was feeling? He had just initiated the greatest attack in history on the enemy of Islam, the United States of America, so he should be leaping for joy in the streets with everyone else. But there was something bugging him that just didn't seem right, a knot in the pit of his stomach. Had he done the right thing? Yes, he believed with all his heart that this was what Allah wanted him to do. So, why the doubt? Why the sense that this was not going to turn out well?

Abdas did his best to shove those thoughts to the deepest recesses of his mind as he neared his destination, the Esteghlal Grand Hotel. He

had checked into this hotel a week ago under an assumed name. Even in his homeland of Iran, Abdas knew he had to be very cautious. There were people from all over the world looking for him.

Abdas parked his car and took some time to cover most of his face with his turban. He wore dark sunglasses even though it was cloudy. He let himself into the back door with his room key and took the stairs to the second floor. Room 223. He stopped outside the door and listened. Quiet, no sounds from inside. Abdas quickly let himself into the room. He had chosen this hotel because he knew it had satellite television. He found the remote and tuned in to CNN.

"This has been a tragic day," the anchor was saying. "It appears that two nuclear bombs have exploded, one in Memphis and the other in Washington, D.C. Authorities are still assessing the damage, but it appears the bomb in Washington was detonated close to the Capitol Building. We also know that Congress was in session today working on the next budget so most likely our Congress has been eliminated. Authorities have not yet been able to reach the site because of the high levels of radiation, but they don't expect to find any survivors in that area. We have gotten word that the president and some of his staff are fine. They are at an undisclosed location. We expect to hear a statement from the president shortly."

"Two?" Abdas yelled at the TV. "What happened to the other four bombs? And Memphis? That city wasn't even on our list." Obviously something had gone terribly wrong. Yes, his plan had caused some serious damage but certainly not as much as he had hoped for.

The anchor continued. "We are receiving reports now that there were actually six bombs planned to detonate simultaneously in six different cities around the country. Apparently this plan was partially thwarted by a DHS intelligence officer in Chicago, Illinois, by the name of Patricia Scott." Patricia's picture came on the screen. "This woman reportedly discovered the plan and was able to get four of the trucks stopped. The one in Memphis was accidentally detonated

when a bomb squad was trying to disarm it, and somehow the driver of the last truck was able to avoid the authorities and detonate his bomb in Washington, D.C. So far, no one has claimed responsibility for this attack although it is highly probable to be the work of Islamic extremists.”

Abdas was baffled. How could trucktracker show the trucks in the right locations when they weren't there?

Obviously this fight wasn't over yet.

Chapter 39

Patricia, Dirk, and Will watched the news coverage from the driver's lounge with shock and horror. Each of them felt pain in their hearts for different reasons.

Will couldn't believe that he had been so blind to allow the terrorists to work right under his nose. The audacity to use his trucks to destroy the nation he loved! What kind of evil people could kill thousands of innocent victims? That was an evil he had a hard time wrapping his brain around. His knees became weak; he had to sit down. He put his head in his hands as he tried to sort this thing out. What should he do now? What *could* he do? He felt anger start to boil up within him.

Patricia was asking herself, "Did I do enough? What did I miss?" If only she had figured out Yasin's plan sooner maybe they could have stopped him.

Dirk felt remorse for the part he played in this mess. How could he ever make up for what he did? How could God ever forgive him? How could people ever forgive him? The biggest terrorist attack in American history and he was partially responsible. The pain he felt in his heart was unbearable.

Dirk's cell phone vibrated indicating he had received a text message. He wanted to ignore it. He was just too numb to move. Too much had happened in the last few days, not enough sleep, too much stress, his nerves were shot, and who could possibly be sending him a message anyway?

Finally Dirk reached for his phone and saw the message was from a number he didn't recognize. He opened the message and a video started playing. He saw images of Megyn Rogers tied to a chair, her beautiful blond hair that was always so neat with every hair in place

was disheveled and matted with blood from a nasty cut on her head. Her beautiful face was dirty and smeared with blood. A dirty rag was tied over her mouth. Her huge brown eyes were filled with defiance and determination as she stared unblinkingly into the camera.

Suddenly a voice played through the video. "If you want to see your little doll again, come to the warehouse. You know which one. Bring Patricia with you and no one else. Follow the rules precisely or this little doll will receive a very bad end."

"Sam Banskotti," Dirk muttered to himself. He got up and grabbed Patricia's arm. "Come with me." He marched her into his office and closed the door. "We have more problems," he said.

"What's wrong, Dirk? You look like you've seen a ghost."

"I wish I had. This is much worse than a ghost." He played the video back for her.

"Oh my God, not Megyn! Not sweet Megyn. They can't hurt her. She would never hurt a flea! Who is this guy? Do you know him?"

"Yes, his name is Sam Banskotti. I met him in prison. Former Chicago Mafia connections, now a Muslim extremist. Very bad dude!"

"OK, where is this warehouse? We can have a SWAT team there in a matter of minutes."

"Did you not hear what this guy said? If we send a SWAT team in there he'll kill her."

"If we go in there he'll kill all three of us. He's using her to lure us in there."

"I know that, but we have to try. It's the only chance we have to possibly save her."

"So how are we going to get out of here without the news media following us?"

"Good question." Dirk looked out the window as he weighed different options in his mind. "I've got it. There's a truck close to the back door. We need a diversion out front so we can get to that truck."

"OK, I'll have Will go out and feed the media wolves something to

buy us some time.”

Patricia went back to the break room where Will’s eyes were still glued to the television. Images now coming in of what used to be Washington, D.C. Hundreds of fires raged out of control as far as the eye could see. The devastation was indescribable, even to the seasoned reporters who were choking up and at a loss for words as they suddenly realized that some of their colleagues and even family members had been killed. Will was feeling emotions he had not felt for a long time. An anger was boiling within him and turning into rage. How could anyone be so evil to bring this much death and destruction onto the country he loved? The country that had been a force for good in the world for hundreds of years. How could anyone hate them that much? Then there was the feeling of helplessness. What should he have done differently? Did he do enough? Questions and more questions; not enough answers.

Patricia came up behind him and wrapped her arms around his waist. He could feel the warmth of her soft but strong body, smell the fragrance of her perfume. The one thing in life he still had that he could still count on. Will turned and kissed his wife on the forehead. “You did what you could, baby. I’m so proud of you. If it weren’t for you, this day would have been a lot worse.”

“I know, it just wasn’t enough,” she whispered in his ear. “Would you do me a favor and go out and make a statement to the media?”

“What am I supposed to say?”

“I don’t know, just feed them something.” Patricia gave him a long kiss on the lips, trying all the while to keep the thought at bay that it might be their last.

“OK, I will. Don’t you think you should join me?”

“Not this time.” Patricia looked up and Will saw that her eyes were filled with tears.

“OK, I understand,” he said.

Will headed out the front door. Patricia watched from the window

until she could see that all the reporters were gathered around him. "Come on, Dirk, it's showtime!" she said as she ran past his office. They dashed out the back door of the office and raced across the short distance to the nearest truck. Dirk fired up the big diesel engine as Patricia scrambled into the sleeper. They made their way out the driveway as if they were just another driver on the way to pick up a trailer somewhere. As soon as they hit the highway, Dirk floored the big rig and blasted toward town.

"This is all my fault!" Dirk wailed as he drove. "I can't believe how ridiculously stupid I was to fall for their lies. If anything happens to Megyn I will never forgive myself."

"Don't think about that right now. We need to focus on saving that girl. What can you tell me about this warehouse?"

"It's just a big empty metal building. I know where she is because of the background of the video Sam sent. It's one of the offices where they had taken me one time."

"How do we get into the building?"

"I imagine there is one walk-in door that is unlocked. That is where he will expect us to come in, but that's too easy. He could pick us off like sittin' ducks as we come through the door. I think there's a better way in."

They were approaching the warehouse. Dirk circled around to the back of the building where there was a big empty lot. He lined up the truck with an overhead door that was closed. He could see the padlock on the door. "Hold on!" he yelled at Patricia as he gunned the engine. Twenty thousand pounds of brute strength easily busted through the door as the sheet metal wrapped around the front of the truck. Dirk brought the truck to a screeching halt in the middle of the warehouse, then he leaped out of the truck yelling at the top of his voice, "Sam, you scumbag, where are you?"

Sam Banscott slowly walked out from behind some crates at the far end of the warehouse pointing a Glock semiautomatic 9 mm pistol

at Dirk's head. "Here I am," he replied in the most evil voice you could imagine. "Where is that pretty little DHS agent?"

"I don't know. It's me you want. Take me and let the woman go."

"Do you really think I'm that stupid?" Sam sneered.

"Yes, I do."

"I want you dead, but you know what? I think death is too good for you. I know how to make you wish you were dead. Now come on over here to me nice and easy and we'll see what kind of agreement we can come up with."

Dirk walked slowly and carefully toward Sam making sure he kept his hands in plain sight at his sides.

In the meantime, Patricia had made her way quietly out of the truck making sure she stayed hidden on the opposite side of the truck from where the two men were. Using the truck as her shield, she peered between the cab and the frame trying to determine where Sam had hidden Megyn.

Patricia felt a chill as she thought about what Megyn may have gone through with that evil man. Megyn was absolutely the sweetest person she had ever known and would never hurt anyone. For her to be brutalized by these evil people made Patricia's blood boil.

Patricia studied the warehouse. It was dark with the only light coming from a few windows high on the walls and from the door Dirk had just busted out with the truck. That light was quickly fading as dusk was approaching.

Dirk had reached the far end of the building and said, "Go ahead and shoot me, Sam. I deserve it."

"You let us down, Dirk. You betrayed Allah, and for that you will have to die. What happened? Did you go soft on us? Lose your nerve? What happened?" Sam sneered.

Dirk was amazed at his own calmness as he replied. "No, Sam, just the opposite actually. I finally grew a spine. I finally realized the truth. All this talk about Allah and jihad and taking over the world is all a lie.

I have found the true God, and he is a God of love not hate. Your religion only teaches hate. The God I found teaches love and forgiveness. You should try him.”

Sam’s nostrils flared as he raised his gun and pointed it directly between Dirk’s eyes. Dirk could see the veins in his neck expanding. “And just what God is that?” Sam snarled.

“It is Jesus the son of God.”

“Oh, please, you have become one of those Jesus freaks, huh?” Sam’s lips curled into a thin hard line. Dirk could see his grip tightening on the gun. The coldness in his eyes was chilling. They spoke of death like nothing he had ever seen before. In those last seconds Dirk thought seriously about dying for the first time in his life. It’s funny how your whole life can flash before your mind’s eye in a few short seconds. He remembered his childhood, all the horrible things he went through. The few good times. Fishing at the lake with his uncle. The bad choices he had made that got him into so much trouble and eventually landed him in prison. Finally, he thought about today. For the first time in his life he felt good about something he had done. So many people had died today, but fortunately, there weren’t more.

But the fear. Where was the fear? Here he was staring death in the face, but he had a peace that he couldn’t comprehend. Was this what it felt like to die? He expected something totally different. He expected to be quivering in his shoes, and suddenly, he realized that only a few days ago he would have been, but now, something had changed and the only thing he could think of was that now he had put his trust in Jesus. Suddenly he couldn’t help it. A smile started to form on his lips.

“What are you smiling about?” Sam snarled.

“I just realized you can kill my body, but the second you do, I will be in a much better place, so go ahead. This world has had nothing but misery for me anyway. Go ahead and do it.”

Sam was visibly shaking with rage, the gun in his hand making a little circle but the range was so close he couldn’t possibly miss.

Dirk saw Sam's finger tighten on the trigger and closed his eyes. *This is it*, he thought to himself still smiling.

There was a thunderous boom as the shot echoed off the walls of the nearly empty warehouse. Dirk suddenly realized he didn't feel anything. He opened his eyes to see Sam's body slam against the wall behind him and slowly slide to the floor, a neat 9 mm hole in his forehead. Dirk turned to his left to see Patricia come walking out of the shadows lowering her gun. Suddenly Dirk's knees felt weak as he leaned against a nearby post. "Thanks. Do you think you waited long enough?" he quipped.

"I had to make sure he was serious," Patricia said. "Come on, we still need to find Megyn."

"When they had me come here earlier they took me to one of those offices at the far end of the building. My guess is that's where we'll find her."

"OK, let's go. Do you think Sam had anybody working with him?"

"I doubt it. He was always kind of a loner."

"I can see why. He didn't seem to have a very pleasant personality. Let me go in first and make sure it's clear before you come in," Patricia said as they made their way to the far end of the building. By this time, it was getting really dark in the warehouse as the sun had sunk over the horizon of the Illinois cornfields leaving just a slight glow lingering on the horizon that let a little light filter in through the skylights. The rusty hinges squeaked unbearably as she opened a door that appeared to lead to a long hallway with several doors on each side.

"Megyn, are you in there?" Patricia shouted. "It's Patricia and Dirk. If you can hear me, make some noise." She signaled to Dirk to be quiet and listen.

Suddenly they could hear what sounded like feet shuffling on the floor from one of the rooms on the left two or three doors down. Dirk started to bolt past Patricia, but she grabbed his shirt and held him back. "Hold on. Let me go in there first. We still don't know what

we'll find." Why hadn't she thought to bring a flashlight? Then she remembered she had a flashlight app on her phone. She pulled out her phone and started searching for the app.

"Seriously, you are going to call someone now? Are you ordering dinner or something?" Dirk asked incredulously.

"Watch and learn," she said as she found the app and her little smartphone's bright light flooded the hallway. "OK, follow me."

They went to the second doorway on the left. Patricia pushed the door open with her foot and holding the phone in one hand and her gun in the other quickly cleared the room in perfect military fashion. Nothing but an old desk in the corner and a broken-down chair, relics of bygone days when there was business being conducted in this room.

On to the next room, repeat the process. What they saw was horrifying. There was Megyn tied to a chair with duct tape wound tightly around her body pinning her arms tightly to her sides. Her ankles were tied to the legs of the chair. The only thing she could move were her feet that she could swivel from side to side making the shuffling sound they had heard. Her long blond hair that was usually so neat and in place was disheveled and flying in every direction. Her face had smudges of dirt all over it. Or were they bruises? It was hard to tell. Her big brown eyes blinked a few times to get accustomed to the light as they looked intently at Dirk and Patricia. They could see the fear in her eyes, but there was something else. A fierceness like she was trying to tell them something, then she shook her head violently from side to side making mumbling noises with her mouth as she did so.

Suddenly Patricia noticed that Megyn wasn't gagged. Why wasn't she talking? She reached down and brushed some long strands of dirty blond hair away from her face and what she saw horrified her. Two little wires going into the corner of her mouth.

"Oh God, Dirk, do not touch her. She is wired with a dead man's switch. If she opens her mouth something is gonna blow. Megyn, hang tough. Do not move your mouth. We're going to get you outta here

safely, OK?" She tried hard to sound more confident than she really felt.

Tears started to flow freely down Megyn's cheeks, but she didn't make a sound.

"I have to call the bomb squad," Patricia said.

"There's no time for that," Dirk replied. "That switch will be spring-loaded. Eventually her jaws will tire, and she won't be able to hold it anymore. Let me see your light. Sam used to draw up schematics for these things in prison. He was teaching us how to make bombs. He would draw it out on toilet paper, and we would have to memorize it and redraw it. Of course when we were finished we would just flush the evidence."

Dirk lay on the floor and looked at the bomb taped to the bottom of Megyn's chair. "This one looks pretty simple. Fortunately for us, Sam was in a hurry when he made this. He used a cell phone battery for his power source. Some simple C-4 explosives. In order to complete the circuit, it has to go through that switch in Megyn's mouth. So I can simply cut one of these wires and the bomb will be dead."

"Are you sure?" Patricia asked. "We have already had one bomb explode today that was trying to be neutralized by some so-called experts. I don't think I can handle another one."

"I suggest you leave the room just in case," Dirk said.

"Not a chance. Megyn, what do you think? Do you want Dirk to try to diffuse the bomb?"

Megyn was sweating profusely now. Her jaws were starting to quiver from the strain of holding pressure on the spring for hours. She couldn't even remember how long it had been. It seemed like it had been an eternity although she knew it had been only a few hours. Slowly, almost imperceptibly at first, she nodded her head yes.

"Are you sure? You know if he's wrong it's over for all of us," Patricia said as she tried to read her eyes. The fear she saw was being replaced by a fierce determination and resolve.

Megyn nodded her head vigorously this time.

"OK, Dirk, do it," Patricia said as she reached down and brushed the hair back away from Megyn's face.

Dirk pulled out the mini-Leatherman pocketknife he always carried in his pocket. He wasn't sure why he even carried it. He seldom used it, but now he was glad for the wire cutter attachment on it. He reached up, held his breath, and whispered a quick prayer. "Lord, help me cut the right wire. Let my hands be steady." Then he quickly cut the blue wire. Silence. Blissful silence.

"It's done," he said as his lungs let out a gush of pent up air. Dirk quickly removed the tape that was holding Megyn to the chair as Patricia coaxed her to release the switch from her mouth.

"Thank you," Megyn whispered.

Patricia helped her up out of the chair. "Are you OK? Did he hurt you?"

"I'm fine," she said as she took a step on unsteady legs. "Let's get out of here."

"Do you think the truck is still drivable after you crashed it through that door?" Patricia asked Dirk.

"Let's find out," he said as the three of them headed out into the now dark warehouse. Dirk pulled the remains of the door off the front of the truck and assessed the damage. "It looks like just a few scratches. Get in and let's go."

Chapter 40

Back at the office of Scott Trucking, Patricia and Will were watching the news as reports were coming in about the carnage in the nation's capitol. Horrific pictures came in from choppers flying far away from the dangerous radiation using powerful zoom lenses to bring the horrendous footage to the world. What used to be the amazing skyline of the capital of the greatest nation on earth was now reduced to a black smoldering mass of ashes and rubble.

"How could anybody do this?" Will asked. "How could anybody be this evil to want to kill so many innocent people? What is their agenda, and what now? What happens to us as a nation? Where do we go from here? Too many questions, not enough answers." Will was tired, maybe still in shock from the activities of the last few days. It was getting late. "Let's go home and try to get some sleep."

"Wait! The president is about to make a statement," Patricia said.

President John Blackwood appeared on the screen sitting at a desk aboard Air Force One. "My fellow Americans, it is with great sadness that I address you today from our Control Center in Air Force One. As you know, we have been attacked by enemies of our country with two nuclear weapons today. The devastation to our nation has been unprecedented. First, there was the deadly explosion near Memphis, Tennessee, that may have wiped out a third of that city. Then there was the explosion in our nation's capital that has destroyed the very heart of our government. We do not yet know how many lives were lost today, but I am sure the figures will be staggering. Our thoughts and prayers are with those of you that have lost loved ones. Today we are a nation grieving together.

"On a more positive note, I can report to you that this attack could

have been a lot worse. There were actually six bombs destined for American cities, but due to some heroic efforts by some of our people at the Department of Homeland Security, the other four bombs were eliminated before they could reach their destinations.

“Make no mistake, our government is still operating. The military is on high alert under my command. We will find the people responsible for this attack, and justice will be done.

“Good night, America.”

“Well, that’s reassuring, knowing that the president is in control without the checks and balances of Congress,” Will said sarcastically. He had never been a fan of this president. “It’s hard telling what he will do now. He was going around Congress and breaking all the rules before. Who knows what’s in store for us.”

“Hey, be careful. You’re talking about my boss here,” Patricia said. Although she tended to agree with her husband that there were many things this president had done that she didn’t agree with, she had to be careful what she said and who she said it to.

“I know. I’m just saying this guy without the restraints of Congress really scares me.”

Patricia’s phone rang. The caller ID showed a number she didn’t recognize. “Who could be calling me at this hour?” She was tempted not to answer but finally did on the fourth ring.

“Hello, this is Patricia.”

A frantic voice on the other end quickly said, “Call me at this number from another phone.”

Click

“What in the world was that about? That sounded like Mike.”

“Who’s Mike?” Will asked.

“Mike Pence, the computer geek I work with. Give me your phone.”

“Why? What’s going on?” Will said as he handed her his phone.

“Apparently Mike thinks my phone is being monitored by

somebody, which wouldn't surprise me." She punched in the number from the caller ID of her phone.

Mike answered on the first ring. "They killed him! He's dead! They might be after us!"

"Woe, hold it, Mike. Who's dead? Slow down and tell me what's going on."

"It's Justin. He was on his way to you, remember?"

"Oh yes, I remember he said he was coming here, but he never showed up." With all the activity of rescuing Megyn Rogers she had completely forgotten about her boss. "So what happened to him?"

"The county sheriff called me when they found his car on Route 59. It had been blown to bits with a high explosive of some kind. Eyewitnesses said they saw a black helicopter in the area at the time of the explosion. I'm guessing a RPG attack."

"Who would do that, and why would they attack Justin?"

"All I know is he was acting kind of strange when he left. You know how Justin is, usually calm, cool, and collected. Well, when he left the office today he looked like he was really shook up about something and couldn't get out of here fast enough. He left something on your desk before he left."

"What is it?"

"A flash drive."

"So have you checked to see what's on it?"

"Yes, I did take the liberty to do that. It's a recording of a phone conversation earlier today. Here, I'll play it for you."

The recording started playing.

"Hello, this is Julie."

"Julie, this is Justin Powell from Chicago. We spoke earlier."

"Yes, Justin, I hope you have some good news for me. This thing in Memphis looks awful. Please tell me you have found all the other bombs and disarmed them."

"Well, almost. I've got good news and bad news. First, the good news. We

have four of the bombs in custody now. The bad news, there is still one bomb out there, and we have reason to believe that it's headed toward Washington, D.C., as we speak. We believe you should take actions now to shut down all highways into the city."

"You say you have reason to believe. What are you basing your reasoning on?"

"I guess just a hunch, ma'am. The terrorist driving this truck will want to position himself to do the maximum damage, and we believe that is Washington."

"Let me get this straight. You want me to shut down Washington because you have a hunch?"

"With all due respect, ma'am, it's a hunch that is based in the knowledge of how these guys think."

"Have you seen what is happening in Atlanta? There is panic in the streets. People are running over each other to get out of town. Many people will die in Atlanta today, bomb or no bomb. Now you want me to set off the same thing in Washington on someone's hunch? I don't think so."

"Is the president in a safe location?"

"Yes, he is, and I'm with him. Of course, I can't tell you where that location is, but just know we are safe."

"Well, just for the record, you have been warned. Whatever happens now is in your hands. Oh, and just so you know, this conversation has been recorded."

"Why would you do that? What's going on? Don't you trust me?"

"Just a little insurance. I find it kind of interesting that a lot of the inner circle around the president just happen to be out of town today."

"What in the world is that supposed to mean?"

"Oh, nothing really. Like I said, just a little insurance."

Patricia was speechless. Was Justin really killed for that? Surely there was more to the story than that.

"Are you still there?" Mike asked.

"Yes, I'm still here; just a little shocked, I guess. Does this imply what I think it implies? It sounds like Justin was suspicious of the president and his staff of being in on this terrorist plot." Patricia was not

liking the implications of where this was going.

“Well, he at least implies that he thought they had knowledge of the plot which wouldn’t be that big a deal. I mean, look at all the 9/11 truthers out there, people who believe 9/11 was done by our own government for an excuse to start a war. There’s a new conspiracy born every minute, but the fact that he was killed makes it look like he was onto something.”

“Listen, Mike, do not tell anyone else about this. Let’s lay low and see what happens. If they find out that we know the truth, our lives may be in danger as well. Go home.”

Patricia hung up the phone and turned to Will. “Your suspicions about our current government may have been right after all. Come on, let’s go home.”

Chapter 41

Sunday morning dawned bright and clear. Will and Patricia were on their patio enjoying a cup of coffee, watching the orange ball of the sun slowly clawing its way up the horizon. From their vantage point on a little rise of the Illinois prairie they could see for miles across the corn and bean fields. There was steam rising off the corn from the dampness that a light shower had left overnight. Now as the sun tried desperately to melt the steam away it filled the horizon with all the colors of the rainbow as the light reflected off the moisture in the air making a most beautiful picture. Soon, the sun would be the victor, and the coolness of the morning would be replaced with the scorching heat of an Illinois July day, but for now, it was perfect.

"Isn't that beautiful?" Will said, breaking the silence they were enjoying together.

"Yes, it is. What a great reminder that God is still in control," Patricia replied as she took a sip of coffee. "Even after the hell we have been through this week the sun still shines, the corn still grows, and life goes on."

"You know God says in his Word that as long as the earth stands there will be morning and evening, seedtime and harvest. That sunrise reminds us of that."

Patricia thought for a moment. "But I'm trying to comprehend why God would allow the evil things that happened this week to take place. I mean, look at America; look at all the good things we have done for people all over the world. We have been the most giving nation in the world. Doesn't God say he will protect the righteous? Can't he keep his promises? Why would he let this happen to us?"

"I don't have all the answers, but I know this, God allows tragedy

to happen to the people he loves so they will turn to him for answers. Remember all the stories in the Bible of the Israelites when they would stop following God and start worshipping idols? He would send other evil nations in to destroy them, then Israël would repent and turn back to God and he would bless them and make them strong again. That cycle repeated itself over and over again many times throughout the history of Israel. I think God is doing the same thing to America. We have lost our way as a nation. Our schools are not allowed to teach the Bible anymore. Many of our churches are apathetic and cold. They teach more psychology than the Word of God. The Christian heritage of our Founding Fathers is no longer taught and outright being lied about by public figures. I think God is saying, 'Wake up, America, before it's too late.'

"But will we? Will our culture turn to God or to something else?"

"That, my dear, I don't know. We can only hope and pray for the best and let God do the rest. Now we better go get ready for church."

Will and Patricia pulled into the parking lot of Plainfield Community church 30 minutes early like usual. They were amazed to see the parking lot almost completely full. Usually people were waiting to slide in at the last minute, like they just barely had time to spend an hour with God before they had to rush off to their more "important" activities of the day. Today promised to be different, however. There were swarms of people heading for the church, many whom they hadn't seen at church before.

Soft worship music was coming from speakers that had been set up outside the entrance to the church. Will and Patricia noticed that the lights in the giant cross were transitioning from Will's favorite pattern of brown with red dots where Christ's hands and feet would have been, then it would fade to a red, white, and blue pattern that reminded you of the American flag.

They made their way through the packed foyer, greeting people as they went.

"Hey, you two, wait up," a voice behind them said. They turned to see Dirk and Megyn walking up behind them.

"Hi, it's good to see you both. You look a lot better than the last time I saw you. Come and sit with us," Patricia exclaimed.

"Believe me, we feel a lot better too. I don't remember if I really thanked you for saving my life but thanks," Meagan said as she gave Patricia a big hug.

Will shook Dirk's hand and noticed it was cold and clammy, probably nervous. After all, this was his first time to attend a Sunday morning service. Will tried to set him at ease by making some small talk as they found their way to their seats.

The band was playing some slow, respectful worship music. There seemed to be a reverent hush in the room, more than usual. Will looked around. Every space in the 1,000 seat sanctuary was filled, and there were even people standing along the walls on each side and in the back. He had never seen the building so full before.

The worship leader, a young man in his 20s with spiked hair, blue jeans, and a T-shirt, led in a prayer as the band played softly. "O Lord, we bow our heads before you in grief this morning. Our country is bleeding and hurting today like we have never hurt before. Our spirits groan within us. Your Word says that when we don't know what to pray that if we will just be silent your spirit will pray for us. Father, we find ourselves in that situation now." He stopped praying as the keyboard player softly played "Amazing Grace."

The silence was deafening . . . then it started. A lady in the front row couldn't contain it anymore and started sobbing. Soon, others could be heard all over the room as the emotions of the last few days were released.

Will and Patricia hugged each other. All around the room, some were standing, some were kneeling, some were forming little groups and praying, many were hugging each other. What started out in silence was building up in one loud voice of crying out to God for help,

for comfort, for direction, for forgiveness.

The band leader started singing, "Lord, hear our cry. Come heal our land, breathe life into these dry and thirsty souls.

"Lord, hear our prayer, forgive our sin, and as we call on your name, would you make this a place for your glory to dwell. Open the blind eyes, unlock the deaf ears, come to your people as we draw near, hear us from heaven, touch our generation. We are your people crying out in desperation."

The leader repeated the song several times, increasing the volume each time until everyone was singing and the sound was a crescendo that surely shook the foundations of heaven.

Patricia looked at Will and through the tears streaming down her beautiful face mouthed the words, "Now I'm beginning to understand."

The End

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SOMETIMES REALITY STRIKES TOO CLOSE TO HOME

Patricia Scott is passionate about one thing: stopping terrorists before they can do more damage to the United States. She has become very skilled in piecing together bits of intelligence from all over the world to uncover their evil plans. From Iran to North Korea, to Venezuela and Central America, she has gathered bits of information that look like something big. But now the trail has run cold, and when it resurfaces, it is just too chilling to believe. How can the people close to her be involved in such a plan? Can the attack be stopped in time? What motivates the terrorists to do what they do? What will happen to America if she fails? Why would God allow evil people to triumph like this? Too many questions, not enough answers. Over the course of one horrific week, Patricia and her husband, Will, find their faith tested to the max as they try to find answers to these questions and prevent the ultimate tragedy on U.S. soil.

KEN BONTRAGER grew up on a farm in Illinois. He has been a successful businessman in farming, manufacturing, and trucking. In 2005, he became the founding pastor of Solid Rock Chapel in Sullivan, Illinois, where he still serves as senior pastor. Ken's passion is studying and teaching Bible prophecy and how it relates to current events. Ken is married and the father of three grown daughters.



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